



Outbreak Company

THE POWER OF MOE

✧ Ichiro Sakaki
Illustration Yuugen

VISIT...

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16



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HOT.

SO HOT.

I WAS SWEATING
FROM EVERY PORE,
AND I FELT AWFUL.

THOSE THOUGHTS,
THAT FEELING,
SEEMED TO HAVE
COMPLETELY TAKEN
OVER MY BRAIN.

"SHIN...I...CHI...SA...MA..."

WE HAVE THE
ABSOLUTE MINIMUM OF
SOLDIERS AND EQUIPMENT,
PREPARED TO MOVE AT
THE ABSOLUTE MAXIMUM OF
SPEED, WITH THE ONE AND
ONLY GOAL OF REACHING
THE THIRD CAPITAL IN
BAHAIRAM.

WE DIDN'T
GET AS FAR AS
PLANNING FOR THE
RETURN TRIP.

NO, NO!
THE MARK GOES
ON THE RIGHT
SHOULDER!

IT NEEDS TO
BE DARKER,
LIKE BLOOD!



Chapter One: They've Got the Whole World In A... Pinch?

Our capital, a sight so familiar to us we almost took it for granted, was suddenly very different.

“A most distressing picture...” whispered our Prime Minister, Zahar, from beside us.

Distressing, indeed. When we looked out the window of our bird-drawn carriage at the street as it went by, the first thing we noticed was the injured. Many of them were sitting on the ground. Those who knew something of medicine, or had learned some healing magic, were flitting from one person to the next as quickly as they could.

These people were out here on the street, we suspected, because they knew it was more dangerous still to be inside, under the roof of a building. Some were sobbing, others simply staring into the distance, but all appeared shocked by this unfamiliar catastrophe.

We spotted one man sitting with his back against some rubble, cradling a crying child in his arms. From their respective ages, we took them to be a father and child. But there was no sign of the mother we might have expected to see with them. Injured and taken somewhere? Run off, leaving her husband and child behind? Or... was she still trapped under the rubble against which the man rested?

Few buildings had fallen down wholesale, but even fewer were entirely in one piece. Most were partially damaged, tilting crazily, or had prominent cracks spidering through them. Even those that looked undamaged on the outside were probably chaotic within. Broken vases and fallen pictures might be little more than a nuisance, but if some larger furniture had fallen over, the floor itself might be damaged. It was all but impossible to go back for anything—not precious heirlooms, not supplies and medicines for first aid.

We doubted anyone had expected anything like this. And so no one had prepared. The ground was supposed to be immovable. We had never doubted it.

Earthquake. Earth quake.

We knew the word, but had never expected that we, or our capital, would experience one firsthand. At the very least, we did not recall any such thing happening in our nation since we, Petralka an Eldant III, had taken the throne. Prime Minister Zahar said there had been one when he was a boy, but only on the border—he had no recollection of any such phenomenon occurring in Marinos.

“Your Majesty, I urge you not to expose yourself too much,” Zahar said now.

“We understand. But there will be no point to this survey if we simply huddle inside the carriage.”

“That is as Your Majesty says...”

Presently, we were on a tour of the quake-affected areas of the castle town. Thankfully, there was no obvious damage to Eldant Castle itself, carved as it was from a mountain. Some broken furnishings and upset decorations were the worst of it.

But the same could not be said of the commoners’ homes. They certainly hadn’t been built with any expectation of being subject to an earthquake. We fully expected extensive damage. For that reason, we thought that a personal survey would both enable us to offer support to our subjects and prove helpful in considering administrative choices in the future. If we carelessly allowed ourselves to be seen, though, the people would trip over themselves trying to be the first to beg for our assistance, and trouble could result. That would only cause more chaos in the city, and further breakdowns in public order and security. Or at least, this was the opinion of Zahar and the head of my royal guard, Garius. Thus we were prevented from doing more than stealing glances out the carriage window. We found it most upsetting, but we had no other choice.

We were just lamenting our own powerlessness when...

“Look there,” we said. On the edge of the scene, we suddenly saw something unfamiliar. No—not unfamiliar, precisely. We had seen it before.

“It’s the Jay Ess Dee Eff,” Zahar said.

Yes: those people who had come from Ja-pan. The army of that nation. (Ja-pan’s ambassador Matoba, as well as Minori, who was herself a member of the Jay Ess Dee Eff, both insisted that it was not, in fact, an army, but we shall ignore that for the time being.) The soldiers wore dark-green uniforms and metal helmets, and rode in carriages of some kind that were not pulled by any birds at all. They appeared to be trying to help the people of the city.

“Immediately before Your Majesty set out, Matoba sought permission for the Jay Ess Dee Eff to engage in relief efforts,” Zahar told me. “Considering the urgency of the situation, I thought it best not to trouble Your Majesty with this matter, and granted permission on my own authority.”

“You did well. Your judgment in such matters remains swift and wise.”

For better or for worse, in order for a prime minister to take some of the burden of rulership off of a ruler’s shoulders, he needed power equivalent to that ruler himself. And he had to be able to make snap decisions about what should and should not be brought to the ruler’s personal attention. A prime minister was not simply a message boy, and one who felt he could do nothing without the ruler’s direct intervention would not be much help.

“You are too kind, Your Majesty.” Zahar bowed his head.

“It appears their vehicles move without the aid of magic.”

There had been reports that, whether due to the earthquake or through sheer coincidence, the sprites had been acting strangely. Magic was proving difficult to use in Marinos, showing less effect than it should have. This was something that was thwarting efforts to help the injured. We recalled a situation from some time ago—a moment when magic had been temporarily unusable here in the capital. At that time, Shinichi had...

We sighed without quite meaning to. Zahar looked as if he was going to ask about it, but he was not so uncouth as to interrogate us about every little thing. Then, too, Zahar knew our heart as well as anyone in the Empire, and he may

well have realized that we grieved for more than the tragedy unfolding in Marinos and the suffering of those who lived there.

Shinichi... We couldn't help but think how heartening it would have been to have him by our side.

Kanou Shinichi. The evangelist of otaku culture who had come from Ja-pan. What was he doing now? If he had been here, he would have promptly come up with some bizarre but remarkably effective solution the likes of which we ourselves could never have imagined. That was how we felt, anyway. When had we fallen into the habit of turning to him first with all our troubles?

But at this moment he, and several other women who admired him greatly, were not in Marinos. They were not even in the Eldant Empire.

What did that man think he was doing? Of all the times...

No doubt he is off being intimate with Myusel and Elvia.

Myusel had recently begun to take deliberate steps to insinuate herself into Shinichi's affections, while Elvia likewise seemed different from before. Perhaps it was our collective experience with the forbidden armor, which had compelled us to divulge our innermost feelings—we no longer had unduly negative impressions of the other two, but for that very reason it disturbed us to see them getting closer to Shinichi, leaving us behind.

We couldn't quite let go of the idea that they might take advantage of their current distance from our gaze to establish a "*fait accompli*."

No, no. This was, of course, no time to be exercised by matters of romance. And yet...

"Argh..."

Even recognizing that it was distinctly silly, we could not help feeling some anger that he was not here now.





It was like a scene out of hell. Like something from *Resident Evil*. Or *Devil Cry*. Or even *Dark Souls*. Anyway. My point is, it was that sort of dark, bleak vista I saw before me. There was no blue in the sky above, no green grass on the ground below. There was only uniform dark rock—and, though I wished desperately otherwise, the red-orange of bubbling, boiling magma.

The rock walls created an isolated space. It was large enough you could have done a bit of running around in it; it wasn't claustrophobic or anything. There was no light from outside, though, no breeze... The only illumination in this chamber came from that molten rock.

Even from a distance, the stuff scalded like an open flame. If you fell in, obviously, that would be it for you, but even just standing where we were, you could easily collapse, overwhelmed by the heat. It was not a welcoming environment for human beings. It would be a tall order even to stay here for very long. It was downright perplexing to me how they had managed to ever build this facility.

"But I can't turn back now..." I insisted to myself. The fate of the world was riding on me. "It must be in here somewhere... The dark energy that will destroy the world...!"

I had come here to find its source and stop it. Because it was, you know, dark. Because it was going to, you know, destroy the world. We couldn't take any half measures here.

You could say that for me, Kanou Shinichi, to confront this thing on my own was suicide.

Suddenly I caught my breath: something rose up out of the lake of molten rock. It threw off a geyser of searing lava (what a pain)—a bizarre monster. It was long and black, seemingly made of stone, its craggy surface streaked with fissures like red lines all over its body, lines that glowed and faded rhythmically as if it were breathing. For a second, I thought it must be some kind of dragon or giant snake, but it didn't have any eyes or a nose. Instead, a cross shape scored the front of it. The front opened like a flower—those were its jaws.

Oh, gross!

It was more like some sort of worm. The jaws, opening in four quarters, were thoroughly toothed, and the inside of its mouth glowed red as well. In place of a tongue I could see a licking flame. Maybe it was magma and not blood that ran through its body. That seemed like the sort of thing you would expect from a monster that lived in a pool of the stuff.

And it *was* a monster, all right. I wasn't going to be able to reason with it. Its existence defied logic. And it didn't look like something a barehanded human was going to beat...

"Hrk!" I jumped to the side. The space where I was standing a second before was roasted with flames, a few stray embers landing on me. I felt the singe, but I put my hands in front of my chest and prepared to fight. "You're not going to stop me!"

Through my mind flashed the images of all my friends who had died to get me this far. "You're not going to stop *us*!" I shouted, and took a step forward. It was so hot. It was painful. Small flames started licking at my shirt; one of the embers must have caught. Just an instant later I was enveloped in the fire, like a walking torch. My skin started to char and fall off. The pain was immense, consuming my consciousness.

"Aaaarrrrghhhhhh!"

But I never stopped working my way forward. If I let myself take a step back, the world would end. If I ran away, the world would end. Death was ahead, and death behind—so let me die facing forward. That was my resolution.

I tried to cry out, but I no longer had a voice. My vocal cords—my entire throat—must have been incinerated. My eyes couldn't see. My eyeballs must have boiled away long ago. And yet...

There's a mythical creature called the phoenix. When it dies, it consumes its own body with flames, and then is born again from the ashes, transcending death. If I was to transcend being human, my human body would have to be destroyed. Death was the crucible through which I would pass, becoming at once human and not human. Superhumans were inevitably created by undergoing death as humans; it was almost a rite of passage. And so...

“Aaaaaaaarrrrgggghhhhh!”

And so I screamed. My skin sloughed off like a snake’s, the flesh melting away so that a new me could emerge from beneath. A body invincible, unthreatened even by this monster’s fire. I would go beyond death in order to save the world.

“Agggghhhhh!”

My whole body was burning hot, especially my chest. When I looked down, I saw a white pattern glowing faintly there: the mark of the hero. The proof that I possessed the power of light that would save the world. It was said the light was given to the Chosen One when the world was in danger. And now, it resided within me. It seemed to be telling me that all the legends, all the prophecies, were true!

“Aaaarghh!”

The light enveloped my body, and my feet began to levitate above the stone floor. Ensconced in the energy of the true and holy light, I launched myself at the terrible beast before me.

“Yaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhh!”

I struck out with my fist, and out of nowhere a massive fist made of light appeared, mimicking my motion and colliding with the monster. Animated by the energy of evil as the beast was, the holy light was like poison to it. I could see a fist-shaped burn where I’d struck the monster, and the next instant it blazed forth with light and flame as if they had exploded out under too much pressure.

“*Gsshhaaaa!*” The monster gave a death rattle and was destroyed. Bits of its body, neither flesh nor rocks, went flying everywhere. But I was hardly paying attention to them.

“Huff... Puff...” Breathing hard, I proceeded forward. My real fight lay within. The source of the dark energy. That evil power was twisting this world, rotting it from the inside.

With a low rumbling, the rock wall across from me began to slide open. The last boss making his entry, presumably. I got into a fighting stance. And then...

“Wha?!”

“Hoo hoo hoo hoo hoo.” Soft laughter greeted me. I could only stare in amazement. The twisted ruler controlling the dark energies of the world... The ultimate evil seeking to destroy all things...

“No... It can’t be... You?!” I said, dumbfounded. Yes. Someone I knew well. “Minori-san...!”

“I’m impressed you made it this far, Shinichi-kun.” She slid her glasses up the bridge of her nose with her middle finger. The lenses caught the reflected light from the magma, making it impossible to see her eyes. “Yes, I must give credit where credit is due. And that leads me to a proposition.”

Koganuma Minori smiled openly. She looked just like she had the last time I’d seen her. Or, not quite—now she was wearing a form-fitting black-leather suit, like a bondage thing or maybe a “bizarre kei” costume. But her body still looked like the body I knew and remembered. What I’m trying to say is, she looked great—like, unfairly sexy.

Uh, but moving on...

“Join forces with me. I’ll give you half the world.”

I didn’t say anything.

“I hardly need to tell you that you have no chance of beating me as you are now. You lack the final weapon, the enchanted, evil-cleaving blade... The Hetero Sword.”

It’s true. She was right. I didn’t have the weapon I needed. And yet...

“Join me. Become my right hand. You of all people are capable.” Minori-san smiled at me, almost kindly, as if to emphasize that I had no choice at this moment. It was true. She was right. And so I said...

“You won’t deceive me, Minori-san.”

“Oh no?”

“‘Half the World’ is probably the name of some chair or something! And when it breaks into pieces, you’ll probably dance around masked and half-naked, crowing about how you’re the king or something stupid like that!”

“Was my plan that obvious?” Minori-san said, raising an eyebrow.

Truthfully, it was a close call. It was that expression, “half the world,” that snapped me back to my senses. If she’d said something like “I’ll let you feel me up all you want” or something, I probably would’ve just nodded along...

Er, uh. Ahem. Never mind. I’ll be serious. Sorry.

“Besides, I know the kind of world you would rule over—one where men can only marry men! It wouldn’t last two generations!” And who wanted half of a place like that?

“Oh, it’s no problem. Mara**h and Banco**n got pregnant in Patalli**, didn’t they?”

“That exception only proves the rule!”

“Yaoi holes are all-powerful!”

“I keep telling you, those things are fictional!”

“Details, details.”

“Is that all it is? A detail?”

“All right, so negotiations have failed. I guess the time for mercy is over.” Then she pointed directly at me.

“You weren’t even trying to negotiate, were you?!” I said. That creature I encountered, it definitely would have been the end for any normal human.

“That’s enough out of you. Let’s go!”

“Can’t wait!”

We both got ready to fight. The evil aura rolled off her like the stench of rotteness, battling the light I emitted. It was harmagedon, the last battle of the light and the darkness. And it was starting right now.



“Get ready, Minori-san!” I whispered, but the next second, a fist landed on the back of my head. “Hrgh! Ouch! It’s like my head is splitting open!”

The Demon lord attacks!

Shinichi takes 99 damage!

“A potion—I need a potion! Hell, even an emergency spray!”

“What are you muttering about?”

“Huh?!” I blinked and turned around to discover... “The Demon Queen who controls the power of darkness and rottenness?!”

“Excuse me, *who?*”

There was Minori-san, dressed normally, with her arms crossed, looking down at me. She was in her JSDF tank top, not a bondage suit, and her field pants. Dang.

Of course, in her case, a tank top was already plenty sexy, especially the way her bra peeked out around the edges of—okay, anyway, moving on.

“When you started to sit facing the wall and mumbling to yourself, I thought you’d finally broken.”

“What do you mean, finally? You just assumed I would snap?” I said, getting up.

“So what *were* you doing?”

“Oh, just enjoying a little escapism.”

“Yeah? Well things are pretty urgent here, so maybe you could do that on your own time,” Minori-san said—quietly, maybe out of respect for the people around us. Then she sighed.

“Shinichi-sama?” An adorable elf maid-san, pointy ears and everything, was looking at me, her pale, violet eyes gazing with concern from behind her flaxen hair. Myusel Fourant. The half-elf maid who worked at my mansion. Standing directly behind her, incidentally, was a woman who looked very much like her, though she exuded an aura that was much more like... well, a woman. It was her mother, Falmelle Faugron-san.

“Are you all right?” Myusel said.

“Oh, uh, yeah, thanks, I’m fine,” I said, trying to muster a smile.

“The way ya just turned to the wall and sat down, it surprised us,” said a lively

looking young woman with animal ears and a tail. She was dressed in her usual baggy pants and tube top, exposed midriff and everything, a constant source of healthy eroticism. This was the werewolf, Elvia Harneiman, and she was the resident artist at our company, Amutech, a general entertainment firm. Elvia was originally a spy sent by the Kingdom of Bahairam, but here we were. With her was her twin sister—or really, her triplet sister—Amatena, and Amatena's subordinate, Clara Belberith. Both of them, incidentally, were fully covered by military uniforms. Dang.

...Ahem. Moving on once again.

"I know what he was doing. Running from reality with some bizarre fantasy, no doubt." This exasperated comment came from someone also leaning against the wall. Long black hair, clad in a black Gothic-Lolita dress that looked almost frighteningly good on this gorgeous young woman—I mean, gorgeous young man. This gorgeous young man who looked an awful lot like a gorgeous young woman. But anyway, he was definitely a gorgeous young man. (It's an important point, so I repeated it three times.)

That was Ayasaki Hikaru-san, an employee of Amutech just like me. He was pretty intelligent—sometimes for better, sometimes for worse—and it looked like he had seen right through me. I guess it proved he was a good personnel choice, anyway.

"Have you made up your mind?" asked someone I wasn't quite so close to. Her name, as I recalled, was Theresa. She was just as lovely as Myusel and the others, and looked human at first glance—but she wasn't actually. She was a doll. A geometric pattern glowed faintly at her neck, like there was something embedded there, and there were more glowing things around her hair, wrists, and ankles, the light visible from under her thin outfit.

Apparently, she was a moving doll made quite a long time ago—a gynoid made of nanomaterials. But all the stuff she had told us—the facts she had revealed, the truths she had laid bare—were just too much for me, and I had ended up trying to escape into a, well, fantasy world.

But Minori-san was right: I couldn't stay like this forever. For one thing, there was Theresa, who put her hands on her hips and said: "Let me reiterate. I

believe *you* can stop the rogue reactor.”

“Reactor...” I gazed past Theresa, taking a fresh look at the room we were in. It almost felt like we were standing in a giant hole.

This was an ancient facility that Bahairam had considered very important; they called it the Dragon’s Den. It was an underground structure located beneath a small hill. Right here near the entrance there was a semi-spherical dome, if you will, made of bricks and apparently erected by the Bahairamanian army. It must have been about a hundred meters in diameter, just large enough that maybe you could have held a soccer game inside. I was pretty sure dwarves must have had something to do with the building process, but I had to admit I never would have given Bahairam credit for having the engineering skills to pull off something like this.

Funny thing about that, though, was that just beneath our feet was a massive, hypertechnological facility that made this dome look like child’s play. And Theresa ran the place. From what she said—and as the administrator, she ought to know—the deepest part of the facility housed a huge reactor that was currently on the fritz. If it gave out, the devastation might encompass several surrounding countries. *Disaster* wouldn’t even begin to describe it. And obviously, we weren’t going to come out alive, either.

Even if the reactor only took Bahairam and Eldant with it, we could be talking tens of thousands—maybe millions—of casualties. But that probably wouldn’t be the end of it, if we were being realistic.

Heck, it might take out this entire world.

It was sort of like how people predicted a “nuclear winter” if there was ever a large-scale nuclear war. The expression didn’t refer to the radiation from the weapons, but the possibility that particulate matter left over from the attacks—ash and smoke generated in huge quantities by the devastation—could be sucked up into the atmosphere and block out the sun around most or all of the world for anything from hours to years. It would be like the cloudiest day in history, all over the globe, and it would never end.

Obviously, that would kill most of the plants, meaning herbivores would starve. The temperature would drop—that’s where the “winter” comes from—

and the whole global environment would change dramatically, possibly squeezing out the majority of all life on earth. That was the theory, anyway.

My point is about the ash and smoke generated by a massive explosion. We weren't dealing with a nuclear weapon, but we were dealing with a potentially big, big blast. It could mean the end for a lot more than a couple of nations.

Oh, and one more thing: we didn't have much time until the rampaging reactor reached that critical phase. No chance to sit and hypothesize about the possibilities. Like Minori-san said, things were urgent.

And yet...

"Okay, but why *me*?" I asked, knowing how pathetic I sounded. Saving the world sounds great at all, but when you're actually in a basically impossible situation, and somebody says to you, "You're the only one who can save us—go for it!" it turns out it's not always obvious what to do. It can even start to feel like a punishment. Here in reality, I wasn't some warrior of light, and I didn't have cheat mode enabled. If I took a cue from the phoenix and got burned to cinders, I wouldn't reincarnate or anything. I would just be plain dead.

And yet for some reason, Theresa wanted me to do this job. Strictly speaking, it was really Myusel's mother Falmelle-san who had started this, by prophesying that I could resolve this situation if I came to Bahairam. So here I was, and then all of a sudden Theresa, the living doll, was agreeing with Falmelle-san and putting the whole thing on me. At least, that's how it felt.

"Because you're the only one who can possibly approach the reactor," Theresa said, sounding annoyed to be having this conversation at this stage.

"What makes you so sure about that?" I said. Theresa was a doll; you would assume she was more durable than any human, but she said she couldn't get near the reactor. That she would burn up in literally a few seconds, long before she could do anything useful. So why wouldn't I be incinerated instantly?

"How?" Theresa walked over to me, placing her pale hand on my jaw.

"Hey, uh, er, what are you..."

Um, and also, you're very close to me...

From this distance, close enough she could have felt me breathing, I got a little nervous. Even knowing she wasn't exactly human, even knowing that whatever was driving her used to be a military commander, and not necessarily a young one, the body I was looking at right now was that of an awfully attractive young woman, and I couldn't help feeling a little intimidated.

Then her fingers traced their way from my jaw down along my neck. It was sexy. I mean really sexy. It's sort of tickled a little, but, ah! I had to keep quiet.

I almost feel Myusel and Elvia glaring at me. Not much I can do about this, though...

"Because you have this."

"What?!" Myusel exclaimed.

"Huh? What, what?" I asked, confused.

"Shinichi-kun, your neck—I mean, your chest!" Minori-san said, pointing at me.

"Huh?" I looked down at my chest, sort of the area around my collarbone. "Huh?!" There it was: the mark of the hero, almost exactly as I'd imagined it in my fantasy. "What the heck is this?!"

There on my pale, indoorite skin was some sort of sigil, full of complicated lines that made it look almost like an electrical circuit. Obviously, I could only bend my neck so far, so I could only see the edge of it. But when had that gotten there?! I wasn't still fantasizing, was I?!



My name is Kanou Shinichi. I'm the general manager of a parallel-world-first company, the general entertainment firm Amutech. That's the position I was given when the Japanese government decided that I, a former home security guard otaku, would be the perfect fall guy to lead their company, which was involved in exchange with this other world—at least allegedly. It was really a front for a cultural invasion by Japan.

I didn't take it lying down when I found out about that, and eventually they sent Ayasaki Hikaru-san in an effort to replace me. There was a bit of a

kerfuffle, but let's just say that since then, my otaku evangelistic efforts have been going pretty smoothly. In fact, they're like water on dry earth—this world was starving for entertainment, and the stuff we've brought in has spread like wildfire. Otaku culture took root almost immediately. Almost before I knew it, there were even people creating their own *doujinshi*. Heck, I was thinking that we were on track to have the first pan-dimensional doujinshi convention in a few years' time.

But after that, things started to change, and fast. Something serious was happening in the Kingdom of Bahairam, the nation next door to the Holy Eldant Empire, where I was based. Apparently a facility called the Dragon's Den in the country's "Third Capital" was at the epicenter of several earthquakes and a large-scale outbreak of fires. The city itself was on the brink of complete destruction.

Not only that, it just so happened that my maid Myusel's mom, Falmelle-san, was right in the middle of the city when it happened. She used her unique magic, or ability or whatever it was, The Foreseeing Eye, to discover that I was the only one who could stop this disaster from getting any bigger, and she begged Amatena—the older sister of my friend Elvia—and her subordinate Clara to bring me to Bahairam.

I couldn't say no to Falmelle-san, Amatena, and everyone else, so off I went to Bahairam. There we ran into wild dragons, were attacked by naked werewolves and weretigers, and were ultimately separated. It was tough, but we eventually managed to reunite at the Dragon's Den, where Falmelle-san was waiting for us. Which was great and all, but that's also where we ran into Theresa, the doll-like young woman who was the facility's true administrator. And she let us in on the terrifying truth of this world.

Namely, that all the elves and dwarves and werewolves and lizardmen here, all the people we called demi-humans, were actually so-called BOUs, Bionic Organoid Units, the ultimate products of genetic science. And what we thought of as magic was actually a cloud of nanomachines in the atmosphere. (These machines were referred to as "sprites" here.)

So it turns out that the Dragon's Den was a relic of a former civilization, and the creatures we called dragons were themselves a form of BOU. The Den was a

factory that produced them. Bahairam had stumbled across it, decided it could be useful, but then lost control of it. And the ultimate outcome? The reactor that lay deep beneath the Dragon's Den was going critical.

It was some trouble, I can tell you that. But it wasn't our biggest problem.

Theresa's explanation had included a few words I recognized. Words like *America* and *China*. That's right: what we had taken to be the remains of a past civilization in this world were actually the remains of the *future* of our own world.

I guess if you were being a stickler, there was no way to be sure that our world would become this world in the distant future. Maybe, for example, they were literally parallel worlds, and it was pure coincidence that this one happened to have had nations with the same names as countries in my own world, and similar technology. Sci-fi is full of stories that posit that time isn't a single straight line, but sometimes branches into similar but clearly distinct worlds. But then, it was just so weird how this place that I had been sure was a straight-up fantasy world had a sci-fi setting hiding just under the surface. I guess that's common enough in manga and anime and games, but I never figured I would go to a place like that myself. Let alone be standing at ground zero when the truth came out.



Our land, the Kingdom of Bahairam, prides itself on the strength of the ties that bind. Some criticize us in comparison to the nations around us, alleging that individual freedoms are too limited or groupism too powerful. But while these things might in some sense be true, they are also mistaken. It is precisely the existence of the nation that gives the people secure and bountiful lives. No nation means no laws, no laws means no safety. Therefore the first duty is to ensure that the state is sound and secure; the individual whims of the people cannot be allowed to take precedence over this. If that means limiting certain freedoms, so be it.

From *that* perspective, our kingdom is a most accomplished country. All subjects are equal under the father-ruler, each supporting the nation by completing his or her assigned task. This was how our land generally operated.

Its subjects saw laboring for the health and safety of the state as their first priority, and they gave everything to it and served it with zeal. One might even say this was a nation's ideal form.

However...

"I'm telling you, it was those Eldant dogs that did this!" The captain of the Undertakers slammed his fist down on a desk. We had bivouacked about a half day's journey by dino-drawn carriage from the Third Capital. We'd set up roughly a hundred tents. Most of the Bahairamanian population had been nomads for most of their history, and even children knew how to set up a tent and ride the lizards. It was tradition for parents to teach their children these things as soon as they were able to learn, and they came as naturally as breathing to everyone in our land. And those of us in the military practiced and refined these abilities until they were even more deeply ingrained.

Suffice it to say, our army could move quickly.

It had been just four days since the trouble began in the Third Capital. The army promptly deployed an emergency reserve, and plans were made to evacuate the city. The surviving Undertakers had been summoned to the largest tent, the military command post, to be briefed on the situation.

The Undertakers were a special regiment tasked with protecting the Dragon's Den, the most important facility in the Third Capital. They generally reported directly to the father-ruler, and had a large degree of autonomy. Only the father-ruler and a select number of important military officials knew what the unit was up to at any given time. It tended to give the Undertakers inflated egos, such that even their fellow soldiers rarely thought highly of them.

The general coordinating the evacuation effort and his staff—including myself, Jijilea Harneiman—shared the general distaste for the unit.

"Perhaps you wouldn't mind telling us what exactly you think they did, and how," the general said, squinting at the captain of the Undertakers. "We, at least, have not been apprised of any movement by the Eldant military."

"I'm sure it was a... a small force. Probably... sappers! Demolitions experts!" But the captain seemed to be stretching.

“Probably? Am I clear that you did in fact say *probably*?”

“Ahem—I I...”

“*Probably*,” the general said, cutting the man off. “Yes?” He looked at us, his subordinates, as if for confirmation. We nodded. “In other words, this is speculation. You’re *guessing*.”

“No! I—”

“Allow me to speculate as well. This wasn’t an Eldant attack. *Your* unit screwed something up. Well? How’s my guess?”

“No, absolutely not! On the day of the catastrophe, we did everything normally, exactly the way the project plans said to...”

“Very well, then.” The general leaned forward ever so slightly. “One concludes that it’s the existence of your unit that was the screwup.”

“Wh—What did you say?”

“There is, in fact, no one who understands exactly what the Dragon’s Den is, nor who built it nor why. Not a single person. That’s why you were so eager to keep too many people from fiddling with your little toy.”

“That’s ridiculous—you’re insane!” The Undertaker captain was obviously agitated. He saw clearly that the general was talking not about the incident at hand, but about the very existence of his unit. “I don’t care if you are a general, I’ll have your head for insubordination! The Undertakers report directly to the father-ruler! The puppet drakes and everything else that has contributed so much to our nation’s military strength exist because we excavated the Dragon’s Den, we researched it, we worked day and night to understand its workings—”

“And you were so taken by your own success with the puppet drakes that you dug deeper and deeper before you truly understood what you had, is that not so? *Undertakers*? Heh. Maybe we should call you the Grave Robbers.”

“You—”

“Do you know what you look like to me? You look like children playing with a knife, with no idea how to handle it. I always assumed it was only a matter of time until someone got mortally wounded.” The general heaved a sigh. “And it

would appear that time has come.”

The Undertaker captain opened and closed his mouth with a sort of voiceless groan; no words came out. He understood the general would never trust or believe him, no matter what he said. In our country of Bahairam, as I have said, the health of the state is every citizen’s first concern. Personal priorities are not given much weight. But the longer our system goes on, the more reckless fools appear to decide serving the country is not as important as protecting their own hides, raising their own position, or even enriching themselves.

The rest of us understood well that there were many such among the Undertakers. When there’s special treatment to be had, more and more people will naturally seek to have it. That’s the way of things. Pathetic as it may be.

“All right, enough,” the general said with a placid shake of his head. “Whatever or whoever may have caused it, the fact is that the Third Capital is currently not under our control. This is a disaster and a very significant problem. We need to regain the city as quickly as possible. However...” Here the general smiled for the first time. Push and pull. Our superiors knew how to do both equally well. “I don’t know if I can quite bring myself to wipe your collective ass, Undertaker.”

“Excuse me?”

“The facts are what they are. But if we *don’t* pin this on Eldant, I dare say it might be... silly.”

The captain was speechless.

“We are in an ongoing struggle with Eldant. And if they were to make the first move, well, what better excuse could there be to take the fight to them? So I’d like you and yours to continue insisting that it was the Eldant Empire that did this to you, for the time being.”

For some time now, Bahairam had been involved in ongoing border skirmishes with the Eldant Empire, but no major battles had broken out. Many members of the military were dissatisfied with this state of affairs, including my commander. A soldier’s pride is on the battlefield, striking down every enemy she can. This was why the general wished—and I had no doubt he was sincere—to create a pretext for major engagement.

To do that, the Undertakers would have to consistently allege that what had happened in the Third Capital was the work of the Eldant Empire. They would have to treat it as a genuine theory of what had occurred—not some slapdash excuse they had come up with on the spot to deflect blame from themselves.

“Just you consider how to make a really convincing case for that perspective,” the general said to the captain. Then he glanced at us soldiers. “Prissken. Go talk to the other Undertakers and the civilians they’ve brought with them. Reconstruct in as much detail as possible the circumstances of their escape from the city. Check the escape route taken by the soldiers against our maps. I want the clearest possible idea of where there’s a passable route into the city.”

“Sir!”

“Harneiman. Help the captain here make his story a little more robust. Then take the Tenth Regiment and get to work. Special duty.”

“Yes, sir.” I nodded.

“Prissken, after you’ve got all the information you can, take the Seventh and Eighth Regiments on a tour of inspection to confirm the accuracy of the intel. Then link up with the units behind and proceed forward.”

“Yes, sir.”

“The rest of you, make sure the troops and the lizards are ready to go. First through Sixth Regiments, stand by to move at any time. Regiments Seven and Eight, take the intel and move on the city from three directions at once. If there really are any Eldant operatives in there, we’ll scatter them. I doubt they’re there, but if they are, it can’t be more than a small group. Surround them and squeeze, and there won’t be any problems.”

“Sir!” everyone called out.

“I grant this may seem like a boring job, ladies and gentlemen, but consider it a necessary prelude to that battle we all dream of. Cherish the dream and carry on with your work.” Then the general clapped his hands. We all smiled, just like him, as we got ready to go about our tasks. Only the captain from the Undertakers looked like he barely understood what was happening.



“You’re the only one who can stop that rogue reactor,” Theresa repeated. But I could hardly understand what she meant. I know I’m repeating myself, too, but I was completely average physically and intellectually. Okay, so maybe I had better-than-average otaku knowledge (for better or for worse), but I didn’t think it was going to help me when I was standing in front of that reactor.

“And what the heck is this?” I asked. On my chest—really, my collarbone—where Theresa had touched me, a gently glowing pattern had appeared. In fact, it wasn’t just a pattern. It looked like...

“A barcode?” Minori-san murmured.

Yeah, that’s what it looked like, a barcode. Or maybe more precisely, one of those QR codes that you see in magazines and on advertisements that you scan with your smartphone. A box shape filled with an elaborate black-and-white pattern. A bit like the graphics from an early NES game.

“It’s a 3D code,” Theresa explained. “Strictly speaking, it’s a type of MM-pigment tattoo. It’s normally invisible. We wouldn’t want just anyone to be able to copy it, so only those with proper authorization or special equipment are able to view it.”

“Uh...huh.” That really didn’t explain much of anything as far as I was concerned. When had this thing been imprinted on my body? Did “MM” refer to micromachines? And if it did...

“You used the PDWS, yeah?” Theresa said, studying me.

“PDWS?”

“The armor, I guess would be your word for it. Code suggests it was the prototype Iron Crab Form F. I know it’s got an emergency mode, but still. Takes some balls for a guy to want to try out one of those. Heh... which is exactly the problem.”

“The armor? You can’t mean...” There was only one set of armor I’d put on recently—which is to say, ever since coming to this other world. It wasn’t some kind of fantasy-knight armor, either. It had been...

““The forbidden armor?!”” Minori-san and I exclaimed together.

“Hrm? Is that what the BOUs call it?”

“Yeah, um, I mean, I think so,” I said, remembering all the trouble we’d had at the mansion thanks to those suits of powered armor. “They gave it that name because it forces you to say what you’re thinking and stuff...”

And that was a great way to start a fight. Or several fights. It was like it took away your ability to be diplomatic. It was even said that one of the fights the armor had started, long ago, had resulted in the destruction of an entire city.

“That’s obviously because you never lowered the level on the support AI,” Theresa said, openly amazed we hadn’t thought of this.

“Support AI...?” It was true, when I’d put on the forbidden armor, I’d had a feeling like someone was speaking directly into my head. Was that the AI or whatever? Come to think of it, Minori-san had speculated that the armor behaved the way it did in order to enable inexperienced soldiers to communicate with their comrades in the chaos of battle and take appropriate action even when they weren’t sure what to do. It was all lining up. It could definitely be hard to speak in times of crisis—something I knew from experience. Even so, I hadn’t liked the feeling that the armor was controlling my actions and forcing me to speak.

“To be fair, we knew back during development that the support AI was likely to be problematic.” Theresa shrugged. All the gestures I’d seen this doll-like girl makes seemed almost exaggeratedly human. She talked with a pronounced roughness, too—and all of this seemed to be on account of the personality inside her, an actual former soldier. I had this dim picture of a woman with her hair cut short, wearing army pants and a tank top that revealed a muscular physique. You know, the sort of kick-ass soldier-lady character you might see in a James Camer** movie. Of course, there was no trace of that now; she just looked like an adorable young woman.

“And that brings us to this,” Theresa said, pointing at the pattern—the code—on my chest. “PDWS units are primarily designed for defense. At least on the spec sheet, the Iron Crab has a specialized force field. As long as it has power, it can operate in virtually any environment. Even, theoretically, in molten rock.”

I looked at Theresa, trying to fight down the very bad feeling I was getting.
“.....You’re not saying...”

“I want you to put on the PDWS and make for the reactor control unit. From there, you should be able to shut it down. That control unit is the heart of the reactor—it’s tougher than even a PDWS, and should still be functioning. Or at least, still able to take our inputs.”

Theresa put her hand to a nearby wall. A blueprint of the innermost area of the Dragon’s Den—in other words, the reactor control center—floated up from the wall as if the rock were some sort of projector. “The only thing you actually have to do is activate the emergency stop mechanism.” A second image appeared over the blueprint, like a photograph. It showed a pillar, maybe fifty centimeters in diameter and cut at a slight angle, with a few small levers on it. Presumably the mechanism she was talking about. “Basically, if you can flip even one of these levers, the job’s done. It’s a milk run.”

“Hey, that’s great and all, but...”

“What the hell is it?” Theresa squinted at me.

Not sounding very confident, I said, “Um, the forbidden armor... the PDWS, you called it? We don’t have it *with* us...”

“What?” Theresa said, in a tone that implied: *What on God’s green earth is wrong with these people?!*

“So, uh, I’d *like* to go in there and stop that reactor, believe me, I would, but... See...? The armor, it’s somewhere in the basement of the castle in Eldant. Nice and safe. But it’s not here.”

Theresa spent a long moment glaring at me. *Can what this complete and utter buffoon is telling me possibly be true?* the look asked. Then she looked around the room: first at Minori-san, then Myusel, Elvia, Hikaru-san, Amatena, Clara, and finally Falmelle-san.

It might be worth pointing out that she and I had been speaking in Japanese this entire time. So Minori-san, Hikaru-san, and I were the only ones who fully understood what she was saying; the other people from this world probably hadn’t followed. Especially Amatena, Clara, and Falmelle-san, who didn’t know

a word of Japanese. Myusel, who was actually pretty capable, and Elvia, who knew a few words, were both looking at us blankly. I didn't blame them; Theresa had used a lot of jargon. At the very least, though, everyone would have understood my side of the conversation, which the magic ring was translating...

"Shinichi-san told her we don't have the forbidden armor with us, and she's asking if that's really true," Hikaru-san explained for their benefit. It didn't necessarily help, because not everyone here knew what the "forbidden armor" was, but Myusel and Elvia nodded at Theresa.

"Point is, he's telling the truth," Minori-san said. "The PDWS isn't here."

"Really," Theresa said disbelievingly. "*Jesus Christ!*" she yelled at the ceiling, punching the wall with her fist.



The reconnaissance by the Seventh and Eighth Regiments reported no problems, so we decided to begin the reclamation proper of the Third Capital.

"First through Sixth Regiments will work with the Undertakers to surround the city from three sides and commence the operation. Seventh Regiment is to join First and Second Regiments and move in from the north. Eighth Regiment, you'll be with Third and Fourth Regiments coming in from the east." The general stood addressing the assembled soldiers in front of his tent. "As for you, Undertakers, we'll be trusting you to be our guides. Be so kind as to steer us the right way."

"Y-Yes, of course, sir!" the Undertaker captain said, nodding frantically. He had been responsible for the oversight and defense of the most important facility in all of Bahairam, yet he had gone running at the first sign of trouble. This attempt to recover the city might be his one chance to redeem himself militarily and escape the full wrath of the father-ruler. If he was lucky, he might simply be executed. If not, his entire family and clan might be wiped off the face of the nation.

"Guide" sounded so innocuous, but this operation was akin to a siege. Those on the front line would be the shields—or if you will, the stepping stones.

Whether the captain realized that or not was hard to say. He struck me as less of a soldier than a bureaucrat, perhaps even a scholar, someone with no practical experience of combat. Perhaps he didn't know—perhaps none of them knew—the use they were being put to.

But personally, I felt scant sympathy for them. It was the likes of them, incompetents talented only at saving their own skins, who stood in the way of progress in Bahairam. If there was a chance to get them off the public stage—even perhaps off the mortal coil entirely—it would be to the nation's benefit, I thought.

The general ran through a few more details, and then concluded: "Move out!" The First through Sixth Regiments started to leave in orderly rows. The footsteps of soldiers, lizard mounts, and dino-drawn carriages sounded in a rumbling cacophony. Dust rose at our feet as an innumerable mass of soldiers proceeded slowly but surely, proudly, toward our Third Capital. From the north, the south, and the east, we would enter the city. I silently watched them go.

"General," my colleague—the commander of the Ninth Regiment—said, turning to our superior officer. "Shall we?"

"Mm. Go, quickly." The general nodded.

"As you command." With that, the commander set off running for a large tent, colored differently from the others. It wasn't ordinary soldiers who waited there, but a specially requisitioned unit. They had been ordered to stay in their tent; the Undertakers hadn't been told about them, and presumably didn't know the capabilities they represented—or what their role in this operation would be.

"Son of a gun. Finally get to come out and play, eh?" The soldiers who appeared from the tent were not Bahairamanian regulars. They had first been invited to our country to assist with construction: a regiment of dwarves. About twenty of them. Nothing to write home about in terms of real combat strength, but combat wasn't their purpose. They were engineers; they wouldn't be meeting the enemy on the front lines.

"Yes, finally. And believe me, you're going to have some fun now," the commander told them.

“That’s all well and good,” one of the dwarves said. “But you need to realize, we can’t dig a tunnel this long all by ourselves. We’re gonna need some extra hands to carry out the dirt.”

“I have a thousand troops from the Ninth Regiment whose job is going to be exactly that. You just dig as fast as you can.”

“Roger that. All right, you louts, put down your cups, we’ve got work to do!” the lead dwarf shouted. The others gave a lusty cry and began trotting after the captain of the Ninth Regiment. My Tenth Regiment had spotted a good place to start digging during our reconnaissance, so that’s where we were going.

When it came to handling earth, no one bested the dwarves. Their magic gave them a special affinity for soil and metals, and they were far stronger than their diminutive frames would suggest—perfect for mining. They might have been the only ones, in fact, who could dig a tunnel as long as we needed as quickly as we needed it.

“General,” I said. “I’ll get to work as well, then.”

“Mm.”

The Tenth regiment, which I led, was also a fairly specialized unit, if not quite so much so as the dwarves. We didn’t focus on standard combat ability, but rather on observation and assassination. Destruction and general mayhem. That meant our role in any given operation was typically at the very beginning or the very end. In this case, we would use the tunnel the dwarves built to be the very first eyes on the theater of operations.

To that end, our unit included personnel suited to observation and infiltration. They would have a significant role to play in the work we were about to do.

That’s right. You see what I’m saying.

The Undertakers, and the eight different regiments that were with them, were all a massive diversion, a way of distracting the enemy. We were looking at a combat zone occupied by enemy forces of unknown strength and affiliation, patrolled by wild dragons in the skies above. A frontal assault would unquestionably produce casualties, and probably had little real chance of

achieving anything useful.

That's why we would be coming from underground, where the massive dragons were unlikely to be able to reach us. Our main strength would reclaim the Dragon's Den, after which we could commence a joint operation with the other regiments that would hit from both inside and outside the city.

That was the true nucleus of our strategy.



Ooooookay.

So let me see if I'm following so far. Bahairam thought the Dragon's Den they had excavated was some sort of ancient ruin. But it was actually a superscientific production lab, powered at its core by a reactor that could conceivably destroy this entire world. Plus, this power source was a so-called Annihilation Reactor—a facility that generates power by colliding matter and antimatter, something far more advanced than any nuclear power plant. You didn't have to worry about radiation with one of these things—that was the good part. Great, even.

The only problem was that the people of Bahairam had been messing around with it, introducing some abnormalities into the functions and causing it to go on the fritz. TL;DR, we were on the brink of a catastrophe that could destroy the entire world, or come close enough to amount to the same thing. To stop it, someone would have to go down to the facility's lowest level, seven floors underground, and manually deactivate the reactor using the emergency stop mechanism.

The only problem was, thanks to the rogue reactor, going to that lowest level would be like stepping into hell, at least in terms of heat. Even the most rudimentary calculations suggested it would be well over 300° C in there. Obviously, if a regular person went in there and took a breath, their lungs would be incinerated and they would die instantly.

That wasn't all, though: according to Theresa, a person had to have a certain "authority" level in order to activate the emergency mechanism—meaning only a full-blooded human could do it. The reactor had been viewed as too

important to trust to anyone else. So even though Myusel and Elvia had both worn the forbidden armor, too, they wouldn't be able to stop the reactor. Even Petralka, supposedly a human, probably wouldn't have been able to do it, had she been here. It would hardly have mattered anyway—we couldn't let someone as important as an empress go into danger like that. Everyone would have stopped her.

So when Myusel's mother Falmelle-san had prophesied that I, Kanou Shinichi, could stop the catastrophe that was happening, this was what she had meant.

This much, I understood. I got it. I could even accept it. But...

"What are we gonna do?" I asked, looking around and then back at Theresa one more time.

The forbidden armor, what Theresa called the PDWS? It wasn't here. We didn't have it with us. But it was the only thing that could get us safely into the reactor area. Maybe there was no choice but to go back to Eldant, head for the castle, and try to get a hold of it...

"Give it to us straight. How long have we got until that reactor is completely out of control? Until it's too late to do anything at all?" Minori-san asked.

"Good question. I'd say... about twenty-five hours."

"Wait, hardly more than a day?!" I exclaimed. We were almost out of time! We certainly didn't have long enough to go back to Eldant, explain things to Petralka, get the forbidden armor out of storage... "Aww, what do we *do*?"

Even if we were low enough to just turn tail and run, pretend we hadn't seen anything here and didn't know what was going on—it wouldn't have saved us. We could jump on a dragon—designed as a living weapon and probably the fastest thing around right now—and try to get as far away as we could, but there were no guarantees it would get us out of the blast radius, and even if it did, who knew what kind of massive environmental changes would result from the destruction, whether we would even survive the aftermath? Running away wouldn't help much if the entire world just went *poof*.

And there were other questions. If this world was entirely destroyed, how would it affect Japan and the rest of the world on the far side of the hyperspace

tunnel? I guess the tunnel had a sort of lid on it for the moment, and maybe it wouldn't affect them much at all. But still...

"It's no use," I moaned. I was out of ideas. If I could just get in touch with Petralka and the others somehow right this minute, I might have been able to get them to bring the forbidden armor here, but I had no way of doing that. Minori-san had brought her wireless radio, true enough, but it had been destroyed when our puppet drake got attacked. Even if it hadn't been, distance was distance, and I doubted we could have gotten in touch with the JSDF back in Eldant.

"Hey, so, uh," I said, turning to Theresa. "You don't just happen to have one of those PDWS things around here, do you? Like, an emergency unit for just in case the reactor goes nuts?"

"Of course we did. But the facility where we kept it was destroyed by the recent seismic events." Theresa scowled. "A little bit of smashing isn't enough to take out an active PDWS. But in storage mode, they lack their defensive force fields. They're just ordinary machines."

"Um, okay, well... Theresa-san, you're more, you know, durable than a normal human, right?" She was a cyborg, or maybe more like an android with a human personality. She'd referred to the doll-like substitute body she inhabited as an avatar.

Wait...

Avatar?

"I am, obviously. But I'm no PDWS. This body isn't even intended for combat duty. This delicate little thing wouldn't last a moment against 300-degree heat. You realize wood and paper spontaneously combust at that sort of temperature, don't you?"

I didn't say anything.

"And anyway—hey, are you listening to me?" she demanded.

But I said: "Hikaru-san!"

"Huh? Yeah?" he blinked, surprised. "What is it?"

“I’ve got it! You’re the answer!” I said, thrilled by my own idea. “You’re using an avatar right now, just like Theresa-san, right?”

“Yeah...” Hikaru-san shrugged, looking like I was scaring him a little.

I was right: the Hikaru-san standing there with us wasn’t the real one. There had been this thing that happened once where he’d put on an accessory that had been dug up from a dwarven mine, and it made this other thing that had been dug up, something that looked like a Slime, turn into a copy of him. If what Theresa was saying was true, then the slime thing was really made of nanomaterials, or so I suspected. There were no obvious dangers to using the avatar, and Hikaru-san had gone on using it periodically ever since then. It was stronger and sturdier than his human body, but also highly flexible, making it all kinds of convenient—anyway, that’s what he told us.

“You don’t seriously mean to send *me* into that reactor and destroy this avatar, do you?”

“No, that’s not it at all. If it were that simple, Theresa would have already gone in there and stopped that thing herself! No, listen—if you cut your connection to the avatar, you’ll be back in Eldant, won’t you?!”

“Oh!” Hikaru-san said, finally getting my point.

“I get it! That’s perfect!” Minori-san added, nodding, clearly impressed.

At the moment, Hikaru-san was controlling his avatar remotely—it only hosted his consciousness. If he severed the connection, his mind would return to his original body. A body that was currently at our mansion in Eldant. In other words, he could be back home in an instant.

Petralka and the others knew him, of course, and because they were aware of all the drama surrounding the forbidden armor, they might actually be willing to listen to Hikaru-san and get the suits out of storage.

“Explain this to me,” Theresa said.

“I’m using an avatar right now,” Hikaru-san replied. “My actual body, I mean my organic form or whatever, is close to where the forbidden armor—the PDWS—is being kept. So if I just stop using my avatar, we don’t have to go all the way back there to try to get our hands on the armor.”

“Still, even at that, it’s not like we have a lot of time.” Minori-san frowned. “You’ll have to get to Her Majesty and Minister Cordobal, explain things to them, get them to understand, *and* get the armor out of storage... It’s going to eat up a lot of time. Besides, people around here aren’t likely to know what nuclear winter even is.”

True enough, and just exclaiming “The world’s in danger!” might not get the point across. Us, we didn’t have to have personally experienced a nuclear attack to understand how fearsomely powerful nuclear weapons could be. We’d seen the effects imagined plenty of times in fiction. “A world in crisis” was such a familiar expression from those kinds of stories that it was almost a trope.

“Not to mention, it would still involve crossing the border of an enemy nation,” Minori-san went on. “Bahairam knows the Third Capital is in a serious situation, and they’re going to realize Eldant might take advantage of that to mount an attack. They’ll be on guard. I don’t know if this is going to be easy...”

“Maybe not. But if we don’t try *something*, then we all die anyway. So we might as well see what we can do,” Hikaru-san said, and then he turned to me. “After I sever the connection, it’s not possible to reestablish it for a while. So I’m not sure I’m going to be able to come back here. Don’t let anything happen to my avatar, okay?”

“Er... Sure.”

“And Shinichi-san?” Hikaru-san cocked his head like he’d just thought of something. “Don’t try to cop a feel on my avatar just because it’s got a female body.”

“I wasn’t going to—!” I exclaimed, scandalized. But Hikaru-san said, “I’m just kidding. All right, time’s a-wasting. I’m heading out.” He gave us one last look—and then he crumpled as if he had gone unconscious.

“Hikaru-sama?!” Elvia cried and rushed over to support the avatar, but his body didn’t so much as twitch. The avatar didn’t return to its original gel-like state, but everything on the surface vanished, and the eyes were still open. It was sort of like having a dead body around, and every bit as creepy. But I guess the connection was cut. Had Hikaru-san successfully woken up in Eldant? That was the question.

We had no way to know. In other words...

“We’ll just have to trust him,” Minori-san said. We all knew she was right.

Chapter Two: When an Armor Meets an Armor Coming Through the Rye

When I opened my eyes, I was staring up at the ceiling of my familiar room in the mansion.

“It really worked...”

I felt a slight lethargy, like I was waking up from a long dream. I was tempted to just let my eyes flutter closed and go back to sleep, but then I remembered why I had come back in the first place, and made to jump out of bed.

But my body wouldn't move.

“Wha?”

I could move my neck; I had a look around and realized that there was furniture piled on top of me, pinning me down. They were balanced just so, so that my body wasn't crushed beneath them—silver linings, I guess. But my hips and legs were trapped, and I couldn't get out of bed. What in the world had happened? My room had been in order, perfectly normal, back when we left for Bahairam. It was like there had been a giant earthquake or some—

“The reactor's energy release!” I exclaimed, remembering what the doll-woman Theresa had said. The reactor the Bahairamanians had fiddled with so much that it ended up going rogue. An early-stage safety measure had involved the release of overcharged energy. That prevented the reactor itself from blowing—at least temporarily. Meanwhile, the energy surge caused a seismic event. And that seismic event—that earthquake—must have reached Eldant.

For the most part, earthquakes didn't happen in Eldant. At least, that was what I had been told. So the buildings around here weren't built to cope with them, and the furniture wasn't secured in place to prevent it shaking around. Or falling. Such as directly on top of me, sleeping in my bed.

“Just lucky I wasn't crushed to death...” I whispered, feeling a chill at the very idea. If my real body was crushed—if I were to actually die—I wondered what

would happen to me. Would my consciousness be erased, causing my avatar to “die,” too? Would my consciousness take up permanent residence in my avatar? I guess, given that Theresa was using the same sort of surrogate body I was, and her real form must have died ages ago, it was more likely the latter.

“Okay, academic point, anyway. This is bad. I have to do something.”

I wasn’t dead yet, sure, but if I just lay here waiting for someone to come find me, it would defeat the point of having deliberately come back. We didn’t have that kind of time. I had to get out of here somehow, and make my way to the castle.

“Hrrgh...”

First I tried just shoving the furniture away with my hands, which were free, but all the furniture around here was absurdly expensive, which was to say it was made of heavy hardwoods. It wasn’t going anywhere just because I gave it a little push. Besides, with my hips pretty much pinned down, I couldn’t generate any power. I was so weak compared to my avatar form that if things hadn’t been so desperate, it might have been funny.

“Shit. What do I do...”

I was starting to panic. The others had entrusted me with their one sliver of hope, and I was letting them down. I would never be able to face them again.

If this had been a manga or a novel or something, the fearless hero would probably have grabbed a convenient knife or letter opener or something lying around and chopped off his own legs to get free. I mean, it happens every once in a while in these stories, right? But I didn’t have any bladed objects at hand, and anyway, I didn’t think I had it in me to chop off a limb.

Okay, so what now? If only I had a lever or something to help me move the furniture. I looked around and...

“Gi?”

“...Hey.”

...found myself looking right into a child’s eyes. Not Man’ya’s, it was... what was their name again? Anyway, it was one of Brooke and Cerise’s kids. They had

a lot of them, and I hadn't learned all their names yet, let alone how to tell them apart.

But in any event, the kid was watching me wrack my brains where I lay on the bed. They were still really young, and probably didn't quite get what I was doing. If I remembered correctly, though, lizardmen children (who developed fast) could carry on basic conversation at one week old. So in the calmest tone I could manage, I said to him (I thought it was a him—I was pretty sure): "Um... Could you call your mom or dad?"

"Ugi?"

"Brooke-san and Cerise-san. Call them. I kind of can't move."

"Ochay." The lizardman child nodded assiduously and left the room surprisingly quickly. Now that I thought about it, I realized I didn't know if Brooke and Cerise were at home, or if they were even safe. But I couldn't imagine they had left the kids in the mansion by themselves. Whatever the earthquake had been like here, it hadn't been enough to bring down the entire house, so there was a good chance they were okay.

I'm not religious, but I was practically praying for those three minutes I had to lie there waiting. Until finally:

"Hikaru-sama!" First Brooke, then Cerise, followed by Man'ya and a gaggle of other children poured into the room. "I thought sure you'd gone out with the Master and the others!"

"Yeah, but it was just my 'doll' body. Could we start by getting this furniture off me? I can't move."

"Yessir," Brooke said, and then he and Cerise lifted the furniture easily off me. I remembered what Theresa had said: that werewolves and lizardmen were genetically engineered organisms created for combat applications. Of course they would have exceptional physical abilities and strength.

"Thanks, that's a relief," I said, checking myself over. I made to get out of bed again, and— "Oops." I slumped to the floor as my legs gave out. I guess the pressure had been more than I had realized. I couldn't feel my legs or feet at all. Thankfully they were nowhere near turning necrotic from blood loss, but they

were numb, like when you have to sit *seiza* for a formal occasion, and then your legs go to sleep from being tucked under you for so long.

“Hikaru-sama?” Brooke and Cerise quickly came to either side of me to hold me up.

“Thanks again. My legs just went a little numb...”

“Are y’ all right, sir? We can summon a doctor...”

“No. But there is something else I need.” I looked up at Brooke, who towered over me. “It looks like I won’t be able to walk very well for a while, but I *need* to get to the castle right away. Could you get a carriage ready for me?”

“Is it that urgent, sir?” Brooke asked, his tongue flicking in and out of his mouth.

“Yeah. Every second counts. The world could be in danger—lots of people could die in Eldant and Bahairam.”

In fact, *lots* might be underselling it by quite a bit. Worst-case scenario, every humanoid life form in this world, including the demi-humans, could be wiped out. But I didn’t have the time to explain all that. I felt bad, but I didn’t have time to try to get Brooke and the others to understand what a nuclear weapon was or how much bigger than one this explosion was going to be if it happened. I wasn’t even sure they *could* understand.

For a moment, Brooke seemed to chew over my words, his tongue flicking in and out of his mouth. Finally he said: “Well, might be quicker fer me to take you than a carriage, then.”

“Huh?”

“Cerise, watch the children. I shall take Hikaru-sama to the castle.”

“Yes, of course.” Cerise nodded and let go of me. At the same moment, Brooke lifted me up with a quick, easy motion, and set me on his back.

Brooke was never dressed very heavily, and I could feel the bumps of his scales against my skin—but strangely, it wasn’t rough; it felt cool and pleasant.

“Here, dear,” Cerise said, tearing a strip from my sheets and passing it to Brooke, who wrapped it around us two or three times, securing me to his back.

They did all this as naturally as if they had planned it all along. I was shocked how smooth and coordinated they were. And then...

“All right!” Brooke flung himself—not out the door, but out the already broken window, so fast it seemed like he might leave his skeleton behind. “I’ll go ’s fast as I can, sir. If it gets too uncomfortable back there, say the word!” Brooke was already running full tilt as we hit the ground.

That’s right... He was a hero of the lizardman people... I thought suddenly. Brooke used to be a soldier—part of the military. So he knew how to handle himself in a crisis; he could be quick and decisive. And Cerise, the woman he married, was probably the same way. It was incredible: I couldn’t think of another word.

The scenery turned to a blur as it flew by. Maybe we weren’t going as fast as a car, but at least as fast as a bicycle—I estimated we must have been doing thirty or forty kilometers per hour. If Brooke could keep this up all the way to the castle, we would get there in less than thirty minutes. We might actually be in time.

At least, in time to try to explain things to Her Majesty and Garius. Whether they’ll actually hand over the armor...

That was another question.



They say it’s harder to wait than to be waited for. I’d had no idea how rough it would be knowing time was so short but having nothing I could do. Knowing that running out of time would mean total annihilation—full party wipe, our adventure ends here—for those of us sitting in this facility at the very least, didn’t make it any easier. Besides, we weren’t exactly feeling like playing word games or tic-tac-toe to pass the time. If only there’d been some kind of actual work we could do.

I let out a breath. At the moment, we were in the “hall” that was the main entryway of the Dragon’s Den, waiting for Hikaru-san to get back or for the forbidden armor to arrive. In addition to our usual group, the people from the Faugron trading caravan were here, along with a number of Bahairamanian

citizens who hadn't managed to escape the city. It was a pretty big crowd, but it was an even bigger space, so it didn't feel cramped. In fact, we all sort of had room to ourselves, our own places to sit on the floor.

"Wonder if Hikaru-sama's doin' all right," Elvia said quietly. But those of us near her—me and Minori-san, and of course Theresa—didn't say anything back. What could we say? We had no way to know how he was doing. We just had to believe in him and wait.

Elvia, for her part, probably wasn't really expecting an answer. But I understood how hard it was just to sit and wait.

As for Amatena and Clara, they weren't in the Dragon's Den with us. They had ventured out to see if there was anyone at all left in the Third Capital. They knew the geography, and as a werewolf and weretiger, with the exceptional physical abilities that entailed, they might be able to reach places I could never hope to go.

And Myusel? She'd been inseparable from Falmelle-san for a while now. They were sitting facing each other, over near where the other members of Faugron & Associates were seated.

"Have you gotten a little thinner?" I could hear Falmelle-san ask.

"Wha? Oh, er, m-maybe. Maybe I have."

"Elves don't put on weight easily. If they don't take care, they can find themselves dangerously thin," Falmelle-san said with a bit of a smile.

Interesting fact. I guess once in a while you meet a human who has the same problem, but if all the ladies out there who were struggling to diet, their joys and sorrows dictated by the swing of a single kilo, heard that, the jealousy might drive them crazy.

"Are you eating properly?" Falmelle-san asked.

"Yes, of course. Ahem... but a woman's fortieth kilo is sheer indulgence," Myusel said with a blink of her eyes.

.....

.....Wait, was that still a thing with her?!

“Huh? What’s that supposed to mean?” Falmelle-san said. I guess for one thing, she didn’t know what a kilogram was.

“I guess it means it’s better to be thin... And that I’m still not thin enough.”

“Did Shinichi-san say that to you?” I caught her shooting a glare in my direction.

Um. Ahem. No, not specifically, but... uh, if the question is, who came up with a totally untenable number when asked about the ideal female body weight? Then, uh, that would be me. I’m very sorry. I’m just an otaku who can’t tell the difference between two dimensions and three...

“Oh, no...” Myusel was kind enough not to pin the blame on me, but Falmelle-san already looked convinced that this was something I had said to her daughter. She continued to look at me reproachfully for a while, but then I saw her put her hands on Myusel’s cheeks and say, “Don’t do anything crazy just to lose weight. Believe me, it’ll be worse in the long run.”

“Yes... Of course.” Myusel was looking at the ground, but she also seemed happy.

Falmelle-san’s expression softened when she saw the look on her daughter’s face. “I told you it wouldn’t be easy. But you can’t give 100% all the time. You’ll wear yourself out.”

“Yes...”



.....

It was, like, this really sweet heart-to-heart between mother and daughter, but also I couldn't shake the sense that I was being severely attacked. Falmelle-san sounded like a mother worried that her daughter was wasting away because of the girl's no-account husband.

From what Falmelle-san was saying, it sounded like elves could all too easily lose dangerous amounts of weight due to psychological stress, and even though she was technically half human, Myusel totally looked all elf, and so I guess what I'm saying is that probably I really am the one at fault here, sorry, thank you, I'll be good.

...Elves.

An artificial race. Created.

BOUs, right? Bionic Organoid Units, I think.

According to Theresa, elves and dwarves were BOUs that had been developed to have particularly effective access to magic—or rather, to the cloud network of nanomachines. (Around here, people referred to the nanomachines as “sprites,” though.) In other words, they were the operators, the system engineers.

Hmmm...

It made a twisted sort of sense, but I had to wonder what Myusel thought of learning that she and everyone like her were created beings.

I guess it was possible she didn't think anything about it. I mean, pretty much every human society has had some kind of story about being created by God or the gods. In a time before the theory of evolution, it probably made a lot more sense than the idea that we just arose in a natural process.

Just as I was thinking all this, my eyes met Myusel's as she glanced over in my direction. I gave her a questioning look. What was going on?

She averted her eyes for a second, with an expression that wasn't quite any one thing. She wasn't embarrassed. Even I could tell that. This was how she behaved when she was worried or fretting about something. She sat staring at

her own knees, until Falmelle-san whispered something to her and she stood up, walked over to me resolutely, and sat down again beside me. “U-Um, Shinichi-sama...”

“Oh, uh, yeah?” After our last conversation, I was a little nervous talking to her again.

But Myusel, still not quite looking up, said almost in a whisper, “Um... how do I put this... I... ahem...” She was trying to find the words, or pick them carefully or something; in any event, she was clearly struggling, but she slowly gained momentum: “I was wondering, Shinichi-sama... what you thought...”

“Huh? Uh, y-yeah, I... I guess I’m sorry.” I decided to start by apologizing.

“Wha...?” Myusel said, blinking at me.

Oops. Was that not what she meant?

“I mean, you were talking about how it’s my fault you’ve lost weight, right?”

“Th-That’s not what I’m talking about! No, I mean...” She fixed her eyes on her knees again. “The fact that... we’re... all artificial creatures...”

“Oh! You mean that.” I was actually almost relieved. “What do you mean, what do I think about it?”

“Well, I mean... How does it make you feel?”

“I guess my first reaction was, *Oh. Huh.*”

After all, it made sense, more or less. Elves, dwarves, lizardmen, werewolves, weretigers... as an explanation for all the different types of demi-humans around here, it pretty much worked. But...

“Sigh...” Myusel listened to me, the expression on her face still ambiguous. Maybe that wasn’t the answer she was looking for.

“What about it?” I asked. Something was obviously eating at Myusel. It must have been painful for her and the others to learn that they were man-made... Or was it?

“You don’t feel... sickened, or... disgusted?”

“Huh? About what?”

“That we’re... all really just dolls...”

“Guh? ...Oh! Ohh! Okay, I get it!” I nodded, finally connecting the dots. The demi-humans around me hadn’t been created by the gods, but by human beings. Myusel wondered if that wouldn’t make a human regard them the same way they would a doll, or any other inanimate object. And actually, come to think of it, I seemed to remember some old fantasy literature in our world took the view that fairies were sprites and had no souls because they weren’t created by God. In that sense, they *weren’t* any different from dolls.

Souls. Souls...

“Myusel.”

“Y-Yes?” She sat up straight at the forceful note in my voice.

“What do you take me for?”

“Wha? What do I take—you, Shinichi-sama? I’m sorry?”

“Moe takes many forms,” I said, clenching my fist. “Robo-girl moe, artificial-person moe, ball-jointed-figure moe, and so many more! They may not be mainstream, but each has its hidden depths and its ardent fans!”

“Er... What?”

“It doesn’t matter which element you are!”

“Um... Er...?”

“So you’re man-made, so what? Read my lips: dolls can be perfectly lovable, too! Mwah!”

There were plenty of shows and series starring figure-sized heroines, right? Heck, Hikaru-san spent all his time cosplaying as a doll-girl character. One could even swear love to a body pillow!

As far as I was concerned, be she a doll or be she an artificial human, if she looked anything like a normal girl, then there was no problem at all. In fact, I would go so far to say that I could hardly understand what the problem could possibly be!

“Anyway, it’s just a little genetic improvement,” I said, although even I

realized that wasn't entirely rational. "I guess if your body was made of celluloid or steel or something, that might be an issue, but..." (I refrained from saying exactly *how* it would be an issue.) "But it isn't, is it? And you're half human anyway, so that would make you not more than half artificial, right? You're not even really the artificial one, are you? That was some great-great-great-great-great ancestor of yours or whatever, right? Don't sweat it!"

"So, um, are you saying..." Myusel blinked several times, but looked at me. "You're saying you'll allow me to continue to serve by your side, sir?"

"Allow you? I don't know what I'd do without you!" I said, and finally Myusel smiled.

"Y-Yes! Of course, sir!"

"That's what I think, anyway. And you can tell your mom I said so."

"Yes, sir!" Myusel said happily, and then she stood and rushed back to Falmelle-san, who was looking at me with a sort of half-smile. Oh yeah... I guess elf hearing was especially sharp. I didn't know exactly how much she'd heard of what we had said, but at least she didn't look angry, so maybe I'd earned a few points in her book.

Now Elvia, who had been silent throughout the entire conversation, spoke up. "W-Well, Shinichi-sama," she said, crawling over to me on all fours like a dog. Her tail was drooping, though I didn't quite know why. "What about werewolves? Are they okay?"

"Seriously, okay with what?" I said, smiling a little.

"I mean, I'm not half anything. I'm all werewolf!"

"Yeah. So?" I asked, trying to make sure I understood.

"So, that doesn't make y' feel sick? You can still get, y' know, moe about it?"

"Plenty moe. I think I've told you that. Don't you remember?"

It was right about the time Elvia had come to our mansion, as I remembered. There'd been a little, uh, well, I don't know if you'd call it a "lucky" accident or what, but I ended up tangled up with Elvia. She'd asked me if she didn't disgust me then, too, and I'd been pretty emphatic that she definitely did not. I don't

want to brag, but every month when Elvia gets her “phase of the moon,” it’s all I can do not to let myself get swept away with her momentum.

“Course I remember that,” Elvia said, looking a little shy. Ah! Slightly Shy Elvia: truly a bracing experience. I could have three square meals a day of this.

Er, but, moving on...

“It’s just that, back then, y’ didn’t know that I was artificial or whatever it is...”

So that was bothering her, too. But to be honest, whether I could get moe about someone, whether they could be a romantic interest or, dare I say it, even sexually arousing—it was really a question of what they looked like, not whether they were artificially created or something. Honestly, character background details like that didn’t really bother me.

Or maybe I was just a weirdo. Who knows?

“I don’t care if you’re a werewolf, an elf, a dwarf, a weretiger, or whatever—it’s all the same to me. I guess maybe I’m not so sure about lizardman moe, that’s sort of tough from my perspective.” But even there, I’d heard that in America there were people who were into “dragon moe,” so much so that it was its own genre. There were supposedly movies of dragons, like, screwing cars or something. So hey, maybe depending on your culture and your personal tastes, you might be into lizardmen. That’s cool.

“Anyway, look. The point is, just because you and Myusel turned out to be artificial life forms, I’m not going to be all ‘Ugh! Yuck! Get away from me!’ That would be dumb and mean. Things can stay just the way they have been. Heck, I’d be in a lot of trouble if my resident artist decided to quit now.”

“Naw, that’s not what I...” Elvia shook her head as if chasing a thought away. “But never mind! It’s all good,” she said, and smiled. I guess I’d gotten through to her.

Then, though, Elvia looked off into the distance and said, “Man, Big Sis Ama and Clara sure are taking their time! I’m gonna go have a look outside!” She jumped up and dashed for the entrance of the big hall.

Well, if nothing else, it looked like I had helped Myusel and Elvia reconcile themselves to the revelation that they were the descendents of the BOUs. I

guess when you get right down to it, most people aren't that interested in hypothetical questions about the fate of the world or what will happen in the future, so much as they are in their actual relationships with other human beings.

I could sympathize with that. Remembering the way my old friend had shot me down, and how that experience had led me to become a shut-in, I could definitely sympathize. You start with your family, your friends, your allies, your lover, and somewhere past all that is that thing called the wider world. But first you have to reach out and connect with the people you know. That's important. You can worry about the world later. It's no use getting on your tippy toes and trying to see far away if the ground under your feet isn't stable.

"That was some talk..." someone said from beside me, snapping me out of my thoughts. It was Minori-san, standing next to me with her arms crossed. "...is what I'd like to say, anyway. But I don't think that's really the problem you need to be dealing with."

"I'm trying very hard not to think about it," I said with a sigh.

That's right: it wasn't about artificially created this or genetically manipulated that. Let's be real for a minute: if I committed to Myusel, got married to her, none of that would really be a major issue, at least not for me personally. It looked like we could even have a baby if we, y'know, tried. Would the kid be human, or elf, or—? It didn't really matter.

What *did* matter?

"A time paradox..." I said.

"Definite possibility," Minori-san agreed, frowning.

Yep. If this "other world" wasn't actually another world at all, but was in fact the future from the perspective of our twenty-first-century world, what then? What if we hadn't traveled from one world to another, but one *time* to another? That could cause all kinds of problems.

The past and the future. Two things that normally never meet, encountering each other. Who knew what that could do to causation? Effects could end up coming before causes. Interference in the past, from the future, could end up

changing the future itself. The smallest things could echo through time until they became world-ending catastrophes in the unimaginably distant future...

Heck, I could be here the rest of my life listing examples of those kinds of complications from time-slip sci-fi stories. You know how they say a butterfly flapping its wings on one side of the country can cause the weather to change on the other? Same idea. Change the tiniest of details, and the change ripples out like toppling dominoes, until the effects could put the whole world in danger.

Like say you went into the past, and there was this mosquito. And even though you normally kill mosquitoes without a second thought, this time you don't. Maybe that mosquito goes on to be eaten by another bug—say a dragonfly—that would have starved, but survives instead. And say a little boy then chases that dragonfly—which he wouldn't have done if it had starved to death—and hurts himself. That injury causes his parents to argue over whose fault it was that the boy got hurt, until they can't live with each other anymore. They get divorced, which causes the boy to go bad. And where he was once on a path to grow up, go out into the world, and become a politician who changed the world, instead he becomes a NEET who never gets a job or even graduates from school. And then the war that would have been avoided if the boy *had* grown up and been able to put his intelligence to work as a politician starts instead, and then.....

See? Small things, big consequences, no way to stop them. War, tragedy. No way to know.

“Then again, on *Dorae**n* they argued that even if things take a different course, they wind up at the same future.”

What could be a more extreme example of future interference with the past than a robot cat going back in time to live with the ancestor of his future owner? The manga was never really clear on the implications of all that stuff for the time-space continuum.

“Some people argue that the flow of time has a sort of built-in buffer. That it can absorb small amounts of interference,” Minori-san said.

“Yeah, or like in some recent time-travel stories, where they say that because

the world splits off into a separate timeline from the point of the interference, there are no time paradoxes.”

“But that just means an infinite number of parallel worlds, right?”

“Er... Yeah, I guess so.”

“Think that’s safe?”

I didn’t say anything. How was I supposed to know? Anyway, the split-timelines hypothesis was just one theory among many, and it wasn’t like there was any proof one way or another. It was even possible that interference with the past could cause something to disappear from the future entirely, to never have existed. It could suddenly turn out, for example, that Myusel had never lived. Not like she was dead, but like she had never been born. And then we’d be stuck in that reality! Just thinking about it gave me the shivers. We sometimes speak of dead people as being “gone.” But this would be “gone” in the truest sense. No trace anywhere.

“I guess it’s a little late to worry about this stuff, seeing as we’ve been just doing whatever right up until now,” Minori-san said.

Well, that was true enough. We were in deep in this distant future. In our defense, we were going *to* the future, so whatever we did wasn’t interference with the past. But as long as the two were connected by a hyperspace wormhole, it was impossible to be sure our world would be completely unaffected. Just think: some sprites, some “magical power,” had already leaked over to Japan. Myusel, Petralka, and Elvia had all gone to Japan with me, and we’d gotten involved with the U.S. Army and the JSDF and everything.

Who knew what that might do?



Lizardmen really were built for war: Brooke carried me on his back at a speed far faster than I could ever have reached even going absolutely flat-out, a speed he kept up as we reached the castle town. I had never seen him race like this before. He looked so much like a lizard that I had simply assumed he did everything slowly. Maybe Shinichi-san and the others had an inkling he could do this, having seen him play soccer once, back before I got here.

“Oh, no...” I gasped as I saw the capital. Holy Eldant Castle was carved from a hollowed-out mountain, and the town that had grown up around it naturally involved traditional-style structures that took the form buildings do at the foot of a mountain. And being the capital of the empire, it was a big place with lots of people. One of the thriving metropolises of this world. And now...

“Fair bit of destruction here,” Brooks said.

I would say one out of every three houses in the city had visible damage. Not just cracks, either: some were almost completely destroyed, with just a few pillars or a wall still standing. If there had been anyone inside those buildings, they would certainly have been hurt. Maybe even killed.

The castle had to be in an uproar. Would Her Majesty, Minister Cordobal, Prime Minister Zahar, or anyone with any authority even meet with me at all? If not, I wouldn’t have time to wait around. I would have to try to steal the forbidden armor instead, but then there would be a new problem: how would I get it back to Bahairam? Even Shinichi-san’s single suit occupied a wooden box far too large to carry. I wasn’t going to be bringing it back by hand—and that was before we even got to the problem of the massive mountain range that divided Eldant and Bahairam.

I felt like I was quickly thinking myself into a corner. I would have to come up with some other way. But how many other ways were there?

Suddenly someone shouted, “Hikaru-san?!”

I knew that voice. It had to be...

“Wha?! Your Majesty?!” I turned and spotted Petralka leaning out of a carriage advancing at a stately pace down the street. She must have been on a quiet, unofficial tour of inspection. I saw a hand that looked like Minister Cordobal’s reach out and pull Petralka back in, but it was too late. Everyone around made a beeline for the carriage. “Brooke,” I said, “go for that carriage!”

“Yessir!” Brooke said smartly, and then I heard a *whack!* and he took a massive leap. With me still on his back, Brooke flew over the heads of the crowd assembled around the carriage, landing smack on top of it. The startled driver reached for a sword lying by his feet, but Petralka called out: “Stay your hand! They are friends!” The driver didn’t look completely convinced, but he

left the sword alone.

“Your Majesty! Just who I wanted to see!” I said as Brooke helped me scramble down from his back.

“What do you mean? What is it you’re doing? Hikaru, did you not go with Shinichi and the others?”

I was suddenly the focus of attention of royals and commoners alike. “I’ll explain everything, Your Majesty—just please, get us to the castle!”



So there we were, deep underground in the Dragon’s Den, the most important facility in Bahairam’s Third Capital. It was a factory for producing living weapons, first built centuries—maybe millennia—maybe even tens of thousands of years ago! Er... Well, when I say “ago,” I mean from the perspective of this world. From the perspective of the world I come from, it would have been the future.

Ugh, this was getting so complicated! But anyway...

Near a wall not far away from us, a group of people was having an anxious conversation.

“What are we going to do?”

“That Theresa girl, we don’t know anything about her...”

“Yes, and that boy—President Faugron seems to know him, but who in the world—”

“They say he’s the owner of the mansion where her daughter works...”

And so on and so forth.

A pretty good number of people were crammed in here, all would-be evacuees. The Third Capital was currently covered in pillars of flame, very hot flame. It was so warm out there you could easily get heatstroke if you weren’t careful, and as if that wasn’t bad enough, most of the buildings that were still standing were in real danger of collapsing.

Many of the people with us were part of a trade caravan from Faugron &

Associates. The next most populous group, though, were inhabitants of the Third Capital who hadn't managed to evacuate—in other words, Bahairamanian citizens. There were more of them now than there had been when my friends and I had first arrived. Amatena and Clara had been out in the city streets, along with a group of the “nekkids” under Theresa's control. The two beast girls were back already, but the nekkids and a detachment of dragons continued to patrol the city.

A number of the Bahairamanians wore military uniforms; according to Amatena, they were members of a group called the Undertakers. Supposedly, they had been given that name because when the Dragon's Den was first discovered, people had postulated that it was some sort of tomb. For the most part, we hadn't explained to them what was actually happening here right now. Minori-san was concerned that if we said the wrong thing to the wrong person, panic could all too easily break out. So as far as they knew, we were just interlopers who had shown up for no particular reason and were now hanging around doing nothing special.

“Um, so... Theresa-san?” I said to the doll-like person currently leaning against a wall with her arms crossed.

“Yeah, what?”

“There's got to be more to this facility than just what we've seen. How big is it?”

“Hmm.” Theresa placed her palm against the wall, which obligingly projected a map of the entire Dragon's Den. “We're in this area. The BOU production plant I showed you earlier is here. And the levels go like this...” She spun the map like a 3D object as she explained.

“Huh? So there are rooms around here, too?” In addition to the open area near the entrance, where we were, I saw several other chambers on the same floor.

“Those areas caved in on account of the seismic activity,” Theresa said. “Or the passages leading to them are otherwise blocked off. Can't access them via the administrative system.” The areas she indicated flashed red on the projection. It represented a pretty good amount of space, but according to

Theresa it was mostly lodging for facility personnel. It didn't contain any really important functions, and she didn't seem too worried about it being caved in.

"Don't tell me..." I said. Maybe it was just because I had nothing to do and too much time on my hands, but I was having all sorts of thoughts, none of them very good. Maybe it was human psychology: imagine the worst possible thing and then tell yourself, "Well, at least it's not *that*."

The Undertakers... The special Bahairamanian military unit charged with protecting this facility. From the fact that several of them were still here with us, it seemed reasonable to think that when the crisis had occurred, they were the ones who had needed the longest to evacuate the city. I mean, if the earthquake hadn't convinced the average citizen to get out of there, the spontaneous eruption of pillars of fire probably did the trick. But the Undertakers weren't just smack in the center of the city, they were also responsible for a hugely important, totally secret base. It wouldn't be that easy for them to leave their posts... would it?

Or did I have it backwards? Would they have been the first to go, exactly because they were at the center of it all and knew what was really going on? But if I was right...

Why aren't there more of them here? What if there are? Maybe, terrified of the unfamiliar BOUs had emerged from the depths—the nekkids—they had tried to hide somewhere. And if they happened to see us just sitting here, what would they think?

And fancy I should be having that thought right at that moment, because:

"Hey, what the—who the hell are you?!" one of the Faugron people shouted. I turned and, to my surprise, saw about a dozen Bahairamanian soldiers armed with swords. They definitely hadn't been there before. Did this mean I was actually right? Had there been more Undertakers hiding near the personnel lodging?

"Stay back! Hands at your sides, you Eldant dogs!" The soldiers—Undertakers?—had their swords out and were trying to take control of the situation. "We'll never let you have the Dragon's Den!"

I saw that several of them were holding wooden boxes of some sort. They

looked perfectly ordinary, but somehow they nagged at me. The swords made sense, but what were those boxes about? Not rations or water, I presumed. There wouldn't be any point bringing those things into a fight. Weapons, then? But if so, they wouldn't want to leave them in their containers.

"Damn Eldant fools! This place belongs to Bahairam!" shouted a middle-aged human man I took to be their captain. He seemed to understand that we and the Faugron people were from Eldant...

"Hrm?" It wasn't any of us in the Eldant contingent, but Theresa, who reacted. "It belongs to *who*?" The rightful administrator of the facility narrowed her eyes and stepped forward. "You won't let them have it? Newsflash, jackass: it's not yours to give." She advanced on them with forceful strides, speaking to the Bahairamanian soldiers who were trying to reach the staircase deeper into the facility. "It never was."

"Silence! This is a military asset of the Kingdom of Bahairam!" the soldiers insisted, even as they backed away.

"Pfah! You think we'd let the likes of you have this installation?" one of the soldiers holding a box exclaimed, and then he opened the lid of the container and pulled out what was inside.

"Nyyagh!" I said. I know, weird noise. But I recognized what he was holding. "*Imarufe bisurupeguze*! The Consuming Flame...!"

A magical weapon that was essentially a bomb. It was the same thing that had been used in a terrorist incident on Eldant soil early in my time here. Huh! So Bahairam had been supplying the terrorists. A common ploy for destabilizing an enemy country from within.

Okay, who cared about that now? There was only one salient fact from that encounter: that bomb had been powerful enough to blow up our entire school. If one was set off underground...

"Stop! They're not Eldant soldiers!" Amatena said. But the captain shouted, "Quit your yapping, you traitorous bitch!" so forcefully that spittle flew from his mouth.

Uh-oh. This didn't look good. They weren't in a state of mind to listen to

reason.

And then he went on: “We Undertakers serve the father-ruler directly with pride—you’ll never convince us to work with an enemy nation!”

“Wha...” Amatena didn’t have a comeback for that. Apparently these Undertakers had been watching us from the shadows, or otherwise a few of them had been and had then reported to comrades hiding out near the collapsed corridors. If nothing else, they knew that Amatena and Clara appeared friendly with me, Myusel, and others who looked, to them, like we were part of the Eldant army.

“We’d rather blow this place to kingdom come!” the soldier said. The Bahairamanians probably couldn’t abide the idea of the Dragon’s Den, packed with military secrets, falling into the hands of the enemy. So they had these magical bombs on hand, ready to wipe everything out if push ever came to shove. They’d had the bombs ready to go, stored here for exactly this moment.

I had no idea whether the weapon could completely destroy this massive, ancient (or whatever) facility, but it was certainly the definitive way of discharging their responsibility as overseers of a super-secret military installation. Then again, with a rogue reactor about to take out potentially the entire world, maybe the bomb was overkill.

Not to mention, they had three of those boxes, each of which probably contained an imarufe bisurupeguze. Backup, I guessed: even if your opponents managed to do something about one of the bombs, they would probably never be able to neutralize all three at once.

“As if we didn’t have enough problems,” Minori-san groaned, her machine pistol in one hand. She was a good marksman and would probably be able to pick off one or two of the soldiers, but not all of them. Not before they set off the bombs.

What should we do?

Tormented by the mounting panic, I looked around, but unlike the time with the terrorists, there were no fire extinguishers around, and I didn’t have time to set the alarm on my cell phone. Not only couldn’t I distract our enemies, if I accidentally antagonized them any further, they might well trigger the bombs.

“Stay back, Eldant dogs!” The Bahairamanian soldiers held the bombs proudly, as if they could imagine nothing more heroic than to destroy themselves in the fulfillment of their duty.



The world is going to be destroyed.

Normally, that would sound like a joke, right?

For better or for worse, in this land where, other than the magic, civilization was pretty much on par with the Middle Ages, it could be tough to even define what “world” meant. I didn’t think they believed that the world was supported on the backs of two elephants standing on a turtle or anything like that. But they also didn’t know about Earth as a planet; they didn’t understand the atmosphere or atmospheric cycles. All kinds of things like that. So talk about “nuclear winter” or “gradual destruction through climate change” wasn’t likely to get through to them. Frankly, it might be quickest just to imply that the world was going to go *bam!* and be gone.

Our own myths and religions were full of visions of the end of the world, from the Last Judgment and the Book of Revelation in Christianity, to *mappou*, the era of decline envisioned by Buddhism, and even the “twilight of the gods” from Scandinavian myth. It seemed to suggest that picturing the end of the world was something that came quite naturally to humans. So maybe the best bet was not to sweat the details, but just to communicate that the end *was* coming.

Thinking all this over, I decided I would try something like: “This thing down in an underground facility in Bahairam is out of control and could blow up the entire world, and it caused that earthquake, too,” and see where that got me. If that didn’t do the job, I could try something more mythological or religious in tone.

But to my shock, Petralka an Eldant III promptly asked me: “Are we dealing with one of those... noo-clear bombs? Or a ‘reaction weapon’?” I didn’t know she knew words like that.

“Er... Your Majesty?”

“Are these not the types of things that normally threaten a world with

destruction? A ‘wave motion gun’ or ‘super laser’ may do so as well, but these are usually fired from some sort of space battleship, so they would not be underground. Are we wrong?” She looked weirdly proud of this knowledge.

“Oh... Well, I guess this’ll make my job easier, anyway,” I said, a bit bewildered.

“We have observed many such tropes in your anime and manga, you see,” Her Majesty said, crossing her arms.

Oh. Uh-huh. Fine. That was fine.

On reflection, even people from my world threw around talk about nuclear weapons or weapons of mass destruction, but very few of us really knew from experience what any of those things were like. The closest we’d come was maybe seeing them on the news, or otherwise in fiction. And yet that was more than enough to communicate to us how terrible these weapons would be.

Plus, in fiction, weapons of mass destruction tended to serve a dramatic purpose; they were always easy to spot, and sometimes their destructive power was shown in an exaggerated detail. I mean, some anime would describe a weapon as a “tactical nuke” but then show destruction much, much more extensive than that.

I guess that would make the discussion even easier, then.

“Do you speak of those weapons that produce a mushroom-shaped cloud over the land?” Garius piped up.

“All is reduced to ash in an instant—terrifying indeed!” Prime Minister Zahar added.

“Personally, I found the geoid warhead in ***cke the Superman* to be equally disturbing,” Garius said.

“You do traffic in the most obscure knowledge, Minister Cordobal. Me, I thought the co**ny drop was rather—”

And on they went. I could only listen in astonishment. Even Prime Minister Zahar had seen *Gun**m*? No, wait, not the point.

In any event, I’d sure never expected otaku culture to come in helpful in quite

this way. There was no way Shinichi-san had envisioned this, either, but I was awfully grateful to him now for evangelizing as hard as he had. Ironically enough, it even made me a little bit glad for the Japanese government's plan to use anime and manga to culturally invade or brainwash or whatever this place. They had one thing right: when it comes to trying to get people to understand brand-new concepts, a few good stories can be more effective than a mountain of description or documentation. Break it down into episodes, and the ideas naturally get into people's heads, whether or not they're really focused on the details.

Y'know, I'm starting to see why so many religions begin with myths and storytelling... It was just effective.

"All right, anyway. Something roughly like that sort of thing is going to explode, and we need the forbidden armor to stop it. I need you to get the armor out of storage and transport it to the Third Capital in Bahairam. Please."

We should have plenty of time. I thought I had made my desperation clear to Her Majesty.

But there was a frown and an: "About that..." The response came not from Her Majesty, but from a concerned Minister Cordobal. "It so happens that we received a report not long ago."

"A report, sir?" I asked.

"Yes, from our spies, and some scouts who were setting up operations on the border. They tell us the Bahairamanian military is deploying to a number of locations spanning the area from the border with Eldant to the Third Capital. And not on a small scale."

I was taken aback for a second—but when I thought about it, it made perfect sense. The Third Capital was already an important military base for Bahairam. They would hardly just abandon it. So naturally, they would immediately move to take it back. At the same time, though, the earthquake would have damaged areas all around both Bahairam and Eldant. And I suspected the Bahairamanians weren't soft enough to turn their back on their enemy just because there was a crisis going on. If anything, I assumed the hawks in the kingdom would see this as a perfect time to attack. At the very least, they would be on the alert for any

invasion from the Eldant side.

In other words, what Garius was saying was...

“If we make an ill-considered move into Bahairamanian territory now, it will be construed as an invasion. They’ll certainly strike back, and they’ll have a perfect *casus belli* for doing so. In fact, I presume they would be more than happy to throw as many of their forces at us as they could spare.”

He was right. Bahairam would claim Eldant had provoked them, and there would be no way to prove them wrong. Eldant and Bahairam had been enemies for a very long time, but in recent years the dispute had been confined to border skirmishes. If they even thought we were sending a military unit into the Third Capital, those smoldering cinders would burst into flame. To Bahairam, it could only look like Eldant was taking advantage of their misfortune to launch a preemptive strike.

I guessed we couldn’t exactly talk them down. My assumption was that in Bahairam, the existence of a facility as secret as the Dragon’s Den wasn’t even officially recognized.

Prime Minister Zahar, meanwhile, groaned and added: “The Bahairamanian military is currently trying to retake possession of its own capital. I can’t imagine other nearby nations would countenance a third party getting involved—least of all us.”

Obviously, Eldant and Bahairam weren’t the only countries in this world. Power structures and diplomatic relations among the nations here were just as complicated as they were back home. So anything that appeared to be an unprovoked attack by Eldant on Bahairam would certainly worsen relations with other nearby countries. And the chances of getting all those countries on board by explaining that an annihilation reactor in Bahairam was about to explode and that was why we were doing it seemed awfully slim...

“Is there nothing we can do, Garius? Zahar?” Petralka demanded. Her Majesty adored Shinichi-san, and she must have wanted to get the forbidden armor to him as quickly as possible. I was grateful to know she felt that way. But just because she was the Empress of the Holy Eldant Empire didn’t mean she could do whatever she wanted, no matter how she felt.

Her two advisors made some uncomfortable noises, but didn't offer anything concrete. I took a pocket watch out of my pocket and looked at it. I didn't know quite how long it had been since I cut the connection with my avatar, but I knew we didn't have much time. If we were going to act, we had to do it as soon as we could—there was no more time to mull it over.

“We're talking about the end of the world, here,” I said, in an attempt to give Her Majesty a little push. But Minister Cordobal replied, “We understand that, but open war with Bahairam, or interference by the armies of some other nation, would make it that much more difficult to deliver the forbidden armor to the Third Capital.”

I knew he was right. But then he seemed to have second thoughts. “No,” he said with a sigh. “Whatever may happen, if this reactor or whatever it is does explode, the outcome will be the same in any event. I suppose we must do whatever we can.”

“That is indeed how it looks, isn't it?” Prime Minister Zahar said, drumming his fingers on his knees. “Very well. I shall have bird-drawn carriages prepared as promptly as possible to send special envoys to our neighbors. They may not be in time, but if we can have someone on the ground, we can at least try to give some excuse later. Those countries we can reach by magical means of communication, we'll do so, on my authority as prime minister.”

“Good, do it,” Minister Cordobal said. “I'll prepare a supply regiment and organize an escort.” Then he nodded at me. “Sound good to you, Hikaru?”

“Yes, sir. Thank you very much.” I let out a sigh of relief. It looked like things were finally getting moving.

But the hard part was just beginning. We were going to have to break through the Bahairamanian military's line, get the forbidden armor to the Third Capital, and do it all as fast as humanly possible. Would we be in time? Would we even reach them?

There was no way to know.



The Undertakers: the unit of the Bahairamanian military charged with

protecting these ancient ruins. They'd probably been hiding in some corner of the Dragon's Den, just waiting for us to let down our guard. For better or for worse, they were inhabitants of this other world, and didn't understand anything we were saying. Nothing Theresa had explained to me would have gotten through to them.

Or maybe it wouldn't have made any difference. They were ready to blow the Dragon's Den sky-high rather than let another country's military—which they thought was us—have it. It made sense, from a military perspective. Very admirable sense of responsibility in a soldier. But it was still a misunderstanding, and a very problematic one for us at that.

If only there was some way to distract them, then I could—I could—Uhhhh...

Arrrrrgh, I wasn't getting a single idea! This was no time for such a ridiculous argument. The world might be ending—but I wasn't sure I could get the Undertakers to understand that, and even if I did, maybe they wouldn't believe me. They saw us as enemies, after all, and why would you listen to an enemy? They were just going to blow us all up anyway.

I was desperately trying to get an idea going: maybe Myusel and I could use Tifu Murotsu to blow the bombs out of their hands with a gust of wind. To cover our incantations, I could get Elvia—no, Amatena and Clara, maybe, to start a conversation with them...

But then one of the Undertakers, in a voice thick with desperation, ordered us, "Don't move!"

I was feeling so out of it that I didn't think I *was* going to move, or really do anything at all, but maybe Minori-san or Elvia had been quietly getting ready to strike when they least expected it. Slowly, so as not to antagonize the owner of the voice, I turned—and was shocked. "Huh?!"

"Shinichi-sama!"

When had this happened? A lizardman who looked like he must be one of the Undertakers had Myusel's arms pinned behind her back and a dagger at her throat. I recognized his protruding, fast-moving eyes—the Eleamachi tribe!

The Eleamachi were the secret assassins who had been dispatched to track

down Amatena and Clara when they'd first fled to my mansion. They were lizardmen like Brooke, sort of, but they didn't quite look like him—more like two-legged chameleons. And they could hide themselves just like chameleons—even better, in fact. They could change the color of their skin to match their surroundings as fast as a cuttlefish. It almost looked like a magic trick. It was nearly impossible to draw them into a straight fight if they didn't want one. The camouflage was almost perfect. They could be standing right in front of you and you would barely notice.

Long story short: no wonder they had been able to take Myusel hostage.

"I repeat: Don't move, and keep your distance," the middle-aged man said. He'd been shouting before, but he didn't need to now.

Huh? Wait, why would he say that?

If they wanted to set off the imarufe bisurupeguze, the magical weapons, why not just do it? Why bother taking Myusel hostage? For that matter, why bother showing themselves to us at all? It could only mean...

Keeping Myusel close, the Undertakers backed away, converging on a single spot. The entrance to the tunnel that led down into the facility.

Maybe they want to set off the bombs deeper underground, to make sure they bury the whole place...

I didn't know how tough the Dragon's Den was, but it had been here for centuries, maybe even millennia. I doubted even three imarufe bisurupeguze together could destroy the entire thing. I also didn't know if imarufe bisurupeguze worked exactly like conventional bombs, but typically, the force of an explosive travels upward. So setting off a bomb here might blow off the top of the Den's hill, but would probably only succeed in leaving the facility exposed.

"Don't move—that goes for all of you!" The Undertakers weren't threatening us this time, but Falmelle-san and her employees. They were all elves, powerful users of magic, and wind magic at that. They probably looked like a bigger threat than we did. Then, too, if they'd been watching us for a while, they probably knew that Falmelle-san was Myusel's mother and the president of Faugron & Associates. That would explain why they picked Myusel to take

hostage. They might be on a suicide mission, but it didn't mean they weren't thinking.

And that made them dangerous. This whole thing was dangerous.

"Stop! This is pointless—we have more important things to do right now!" Amatenas said, trying again to reason with them. She'd heard Theresa and me talking, and knew that what the Undertakers were trying to do wouldn't accomplish anything. Amatenas might not have gotten the full story—the conversation about the reactor took place in Japanese, and only Minori-san and I were wearing interpreter rings—but she was smart enough to have grasped the picture of what was going on.

"You all played around down here with no idea what you were really dealing with, and now we may be on the cusp of a world-ending explosion!" she said. "And this man here is the only one who has any chance of stopping it! This isn't about Bahairam or Eldant—we're all going to be destroyed together!"

"Pfah! As if we would trust the words of a traitor!" the Undertaker soldiers shouted back. Uh... Well, I sort of saw where they were coming from. Worldwide destruction wasn't necessarily something that seemed plausible, coming out of the blue like that. If Theresa's story was to be believed, the world we were in now was Earth's distant future—but heck, maybe these soldiers didn't even know the world was round. You might know the word "world," but you might not know or agree about exactly what it encompassed. At which point "the destruction of the world" became... metaphysical? Academic? Hard to picture, anyway.

And then imagine all that, plus it turns out it's your fault for screwing around in some ruins. It wouldn't be easy to accept.

"You follow us, the elf dies!" the Undertakers said, backing toward the tunnel.

"Myusel!" Falmelle-san cried. She seemed about to run to her daughter, but her employees held her back. Falmelle-san had always looked so calm and cool to me, but I guess a mother is a mother. She couldn't just stand by and watch her daughter be taken hostage.

I didn't feel great about it, either, but as desperate as I had been feeling for quite a while now, I hadn't come up with any bright ideas to deal with this

situation.

What to do? What to do? You have to stay calm, Kanou Shinichi—stay calm and think!



Okay, so they might or might not have understood the niceties of what was happening. But at least Her Majesty, Minister Cordobal, and Prime Minister Zahar clearly grasped that we had to hurry.

It had been about an hour since I'd explained the situation and begged them to give me the forbidden armor. Minister Cordobal had organized a delivery unit and brought all four sets of the armor Shinichi-san and the others had used out onto the castle practice grounds. Considering that Marinos was in chaos because of the earthquake, it was almost miraculous that all this had been accomplished in just sixty minutes.

It was the transport unit, though, that startled me most.

"But those..." I said. "Those are Faldras!"

That's right: "false dragons," a type of machine once built for us by some very dedicated dwarves. They were powered by magic, controlled by elven wind-magic abilities, and could fly through the sky just like real dragons. The Eldant government had recognized their potential as a weapon of war and had begun preparing to mass-produce them—but I didn't know it had gotten any further than that.

Now I was looking at five of them, sitting smack in the middle of the practice area. For some reason, one of them was painted completely red, while the others were green, but with one unusual dark-red spot.

I knew why they were here, though: this would make getting over the mountains on the border a lot easier. A lot faster. Heck, that was how I'd gotten into Bahairam the first time.

What's more, I saw a young man and young woman arguing at the foot of one of the Faldras.

"No, no! The mark goes on the right shoulder!"

“It needs to be darker, like blood!”

I recognized those two. “Hey, if it isn’t—”

“Hikaru-sensei!” the young woman said, spotting me. They rushed over to me: not Eldant soldiers, but two of Shinichi-san’s and my students in “otaku studies.” The dwarf Romilda and the elf Loek.

“Don’t tell me!” I said. “You two aren’t going to—?”

“That’s right!” Romilda exclaimed with a grin and a nod. Loek nodded, too, but he looked a lot more serious. They were obviously both raring to go.

“But this is a military mission,” I said. True, we weren’t invading or anything, but we were going to ride on a weapon straight into enemy territory. That seemed like something you’d want to leave to the soldiers. Bringing along a couple of students—kids at that—seemed irresponsible. At least, I thought so.

“But Minori-sensei is in trouble!” Loek said, clasping his hands together. Ahh. So that was why he was so fired up. Ever since one particular incident, Loek had been infatuated with Minori-san, or... really a bit obsessed, you might say. In any event, he was head over heels for her. I guess you couldn’t have kept him away by force when he heard she was in trouble.

“What can I say? Elves are dumb,” Romilda said, jerking a thumb at Loek. “He looked like he might just go running off to Bahairam on foot.” And that, I suppose, explained why his friend Romilda had come along, arguing all the way.

The two of them were too stubborn to admit it, but any outside observer could see how close they were... If Loek had decided he was going, it wasn’t surprising to see Romilda right there with him. Heck, they’d been the ones to operate the very first Faldra, when they used it to fly to Bahairam to rescue Shinichi-san.

Wait... Did that mean...?

“You two are here as, like, consultants?”

No matter how enthusiastic Loek and Romilda might be, they wouldn’t be here without Minister Cordobal’s permission. In fact, I couldn’t imagine how they would even have found out about this mission otherwise. He must have

asked them to come. He *wanted* them along.

“Yep!” Loek said with a big grin. “We’ve been to Bahairam with one of these things before, and nobody knows more about operating a Faldra than we do! That naturally makes Unit 01, the Faldra we’ll be flying in, the lead unit, and tradition dictates it has to be red and have a horn! Every detail is ready!”

“And, uh, what tradition is that, exactly?” I asked. I wasn’t sure those details mattered at this point.

“We’re so good at flying it, it’ll look like it’s going three times as fast!”

“I’m not hearing this.”

“Plus, we’re giving the mass-produced units a mark because they’re the vampire squad!”

“I am *not* hearing this.”

Ignoring my own profound otaku leanings—I didn’t have time to be entertaining this stuff right now anyway—I looked toward the green Faldras. Each one had four or five crew members: an elf-dwarf team to fly it, and a couple of human soldiers as support staff. As terrifying as a group of Faldras might look, it was actually a small unit, just twenty or twenty-five people. Part of the reason they could get it ready in just an hour.

“Hikaru!”

I turned to find Petralka an Eldant III and her minister, Garius en Cordobal, coming toward me.

“Your Majesty. Minister Cordobal...”

“We have the absolute minimum of soldiers and equipment, prepared to move at the absolute maximum of speed, with the one and only goal of reaching the Third Capital in Bahairam,” Minister Cordobal said. Then he paused. “That’s the fancy way of saying that this is all we could manage at the moment. Getting any more people together would have taken too long, and would have made it hard to sustain the excuse that we were merely delivering supplies. None of the other nations would believe it.”

“Understandable...” I said.

“I’ll be frank with you: we didn’t get as far as planning for the return trip.”

I understood what he was saying. We might fly over the Bahairamanians’ heads and get into the city, but we couldn’t expect them to just suck their thumbs and watch us leave again when we were done. While Bahairam might not have anything exactly equivalent to Faldras, they did have their puppet drakes, a sort of living weapon. If it came to a straight fight, our Faldras weren’t getting out unscathed.

“You’re saying this is a one-way trip?!” I exclaimed.

“Essentially, yes.”

“But they’re just students! Children!” I said, pointing to Loek and Romilda, but Minister Cordobal simply shrugged. “You said it yourself. If we *don’t* do this, Marinos and perhaps all of Eldant may go up in smoke. That explosion isn’t going to make any distinction between students and soldiers, or grown-ups and children. We have to use the best personnel we’ve got.”

“You’re right—I mean, I know you are...”

“All right. If it please Your Majesty, I shall be on my way,” Minister Cordobal said, and then he bowed to Petralka.

She nodded reluctantly. “Do not say anything irresponsible: do not tell us you may not come back. We charge you to return with Shinichi and everyone else. *You*, Garius. This is an order from your empress. Do you understand?”

Minister Cordobal paused just long enough for a pained smile to cross his face. “As Your Majesty wills.”

She obviously desperately wanted Minister Cordobal to come back alive.

Wait—she wanted... *what?*

“H-Hold on! Minister Cordobal, you’re going too?”

“That’s correct,” he said calmly. “Sitting and waiting doesn’t suit me.”

“But—” I couldn’t believe that Minister Cordobal, the leader of the royal guard and de facto head of the Eldant military, would personally come on a mission like this. I guess this handsome young commander was making it clear that he didn’t intend to ask children to put themselves at risk while he sat in

safety.

“Whatever may happen to me, so long as Her Majesty survives, there will be no problem,” he went on, with nothing but conviction in his voice. “And let it be said... I also personally wish to help Shinichi. And I must repay Minori for her generous provision of *bee-ell* books. I have the status, I have the authority. Permit me this one selfish indulgence.”

I was so stunned that I didn’t know what to say. I’d always taken Minister Cordobal to be a calm, rational person—but I guess there was a hidden passion there.

“Even though you will not permit our own,” Her Majesty said with open dissatisfaction. Knowing her, I’m sure she’d tried to wheedle him into letting her come help Shinichi-san as well.

“Your Majesty is the Empress, as you well know,” Minister Cordobal said firmly. “It would be disastrous for our nation if anything should happen to the occupant of the throne.”

“Says the one first in line for the succession. But in any event, very well.” Her Majesty let out a long breath, then looked up at us. “In our own name, that of Petralka an Eldant III, we command you! Go, quickly, and save the world!”

All of us—me, Loek, Romilda, and Minister Cordobal—bowed our heads to the adorable empress and replied in unison: “Yes, Your Majesty!”



The great hall of the Dragon’s Den was rife with tension. The Undertakers stood across from us, at the entrance to the staircase that led deeper into the facility. And they had Myusel as their hostage. An Eleamachi-tribe killer had a dagger at her neck, as if to say: *one wrong move, and the elf gets it*. And behind him were no fewer than three soldiers with imarufe bisurupeguze, bombs known as “the Consuming Flame.”

Who did we have? We had me, Elvia, Minori-san, Amatena, Clara, and Falmelle-san, along with various members of Faugron & Associates. And Theresa.

Caught in between these two groups were a number of Bahairamanian citizens, looking back and forth between us with agitation. They didn't know which group to back. Because they were, after all, Bahairamanian, you might have expected them to unquestioningly follow the Undertakers, but since the soldiers had announced that they were going to annihilate the Dragon's Den in order to save it, the citizens were understandably wary of just going along with their plan.

Besides, we had Amatena and Clara on our side. Bahairamanian soldiers of our own. And Amatena had tried to convince the Undertakers that it would be stupid to blow themselves up. From the perspective of local values, she probably sounded the more sensible, I guessed.

To be fair, the civilians probably didn't make a lot of difference in the overall equation. Not counting them, our numbers were about equal. But the soldiers had Myusel as a hostage, plus three bombs, so they definitely held the upper hand. I didn't know if the imarufe bisurupeguze worked exactly the same way bombs did in our world, but it was always possible that if one went off, the others would follow in a chain reaction. Even without the hostage situation, we would have had to approach this very, very carefully.

This was no good. There was no obvious way to deal with this. That was why Minori-san and Amatena were both standing there, looking serious but not doing anything. As soldiers themselves, if there'd been any normal way of handling this, they would have been way more equipped than the likes of me. They would've done something already.

But at that moment...

"Hoo... Hoo hoo hoo... Hoo hoo hoo hoo hahahahaha!"

"What the hell?!" The Undertakers flinched at the sudden burst of laughter.

"Hahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahha!"

It was just something I decided to try. I know you're wondering: what did I hope to accomplish by laughing?

When you didn't have any good way to come at an opponent, sometimes the only thing left was to set up a verbal smokescreen. Maybe the only thing I could

do was bluff as hard as I could, and try to create some sort of opening we could exploit. If the enemy lost their will to fight, that would be perfect, but at the very least maybe I could distract them. Give Minori-san, Amaten, and Clara an opportunity to do something. Maybe. Possibly. I hoped.

And so I laughed while I thought. “Hahahahahaha, ahhh haahahaha!”

Umm. Ummmm. Let’s see. We got as far as the laughing. What comes after that? Think! Think, Kanou Shinichi! We need to buy time somehow!

I decided to go the “diss” route. “What are you all, stupid?!” I said, still laughing. “Hahaha, of course you are—complete idiots!”

“Idiots?” demanded the soldier with the knife to Myusel’s throat, his bulging eyes sweeping the room.

Ah, they took the bait. Okay, next... Uh, next.....

“You say you’ll never give us the Dragon’s Den? That you’ll blow it up instead? Ahh hahahahaha! God! I’d like—haha! I’d like to see that!”

“Wha?” I could see a tremor run among the Undertakers. Then again, the Faugron people looked equally shocked. *Please, just don’t come butting in, okay?!* I thought.

“What do you think we *came* here for?! To destroy this facility! And now you’re going to do our work for us? Never had such an easy mission!”

When you tell a person not to do something, they want to do it—but when you order them to do it, suddenly they don’t want to. The Undertakers thought that by blowing up the Dragon’s Den, they would be preserving their pride and rubbing the Eldant army’s noses in it at the same time. But if I told them that was exactly what we wanted, it might make them think twice.

“Just what the hell—”

“You lot think your puppet drakes are just wonderful, don’t you? Fancy new weapon! You’re so sure we in Eldant must be just dying to have some of our own! That’s why you’re so certain we’re here to steal the technology from you! Ahh hahahahaha!”

“What—are you trying to say that isn’t what you’re after?”

“It isn’t at all! Not at all. We, the Holy Eldant Empire, already have weapons that can easily match your puppet drakes. In fact, the Empire has already defeated puppet drakes two or three times—without a single casualty!”

That part was true. The time when the Faldra had come to rescue me was one. The time the rogue puppet drake had wandered into Eldant territory was another. Strictly speaking, it was JSDF weaponry that had struck the final blow in each case, but I figured this would be enough to throw these guys off the scent.

The key to getting people to believe a big lie is mixing in a bunch of small truths. It makes people more willing to swallow the whopper. Including some facts the other person can easily verify makes your lie all the more persuasive. I learned that a long time ago from my light-novelist dad. I wasn’t sure if the Undertakers knew that several puppet drakes had in fact been defeated, but I assumed there was a good chance they’d heard the news in some form or other. The puppet drakes were their shiny new weapons system, after all, produced right here in this facility.

Long story short, they would know that not everything I was saying was complete nonsense. As for the rest, I just had to sound confident. Or at least try.

“It’s simple. The Eldant Empire wanted to buy a little time while they brought mass production of the new weapon online. After all, we do recognize that the puppet drakes are powerful stuff. It would be no fun for us if you were able to put a bunch of them in the air before we could get our new weapon underway.”

The Undertakers looked at each other, shocked. Hey! They were buying it! *All right!*

“And so, here we are to destroy the production center of your puppet drakes. Need I reiterate? We don’t want the technology. If capture had been our mission, I assure you we would have come with a larger force.”

That really got a rise out of the soldiers.

“In any event, if we slow down production of your little pets, that’s good enough for us. If it stops altogether, even better. So if you’re so eager to destroy the Dragon’s Den, then be our guests. It would certainly make my life

easier.”

I gave a dismissive wave of my hand specifically to provoke them, even though I could feel cold sweat running down my back. There was always an outside chance they’d just reply: “Huh, then I guess everyone will be happy!” and blow the Dragon’s Den to pieces. Along with all of us. And I didn’t want that.

So I decided to try something else. “Mm, one little wrinkle, though. I *would* like to get back to Eldant alive,” I said, shrugging as nonchalantly as I could. “So if you want to blow yourselves up, feel free, but be so kind as to do it after we’ve left.”

“Hey! We’re the ones with the hostage here!”

“Yes, a hostage who came here with me as part of the demolitions team, fully cognizant of the risks she was running. Isn’t that right, Myusel?” I smiled, while surreptitiously trying to show her my phone, on which I had typed in Japanese, in the biggest font I could find, “*Not true. Play along.*” I was a little worried she wouldn’t be close enough to read it, but—

“Wha? Ahem, yes! Of course I did!” she said with an authoritative nod.

“I’ll be sure to inform Minister Cordobal of your valiant sacrifice, Myusel,” I said. “Rest assured the Eldant Empire will take good care of your family. That sick brother of yours? As blood relation to someone who helped complete a mission of this importance, I’m sure he’ll live the rest of his life in luxury at the Empire’s expense. Go to your grave with a serene heart!”

“Y-Yes, sir!”

Uh, Myusel? That nod’s a little too cheerful. Try for something more tragic, okay? But I couldn’t say that out loud, so I decided to forge ahead.

“Shinichi-sa—” Elvia seemed about to say something—maybe she didn’t quite grasp my strategy—but Clara rushed over and clamped a hand over her mouth, while Amatena placed a hand on her shoulder, urging her to stay still. Thank goodness she was a quick thinker.

“Eh, I guess it’d be just as well if she didn’t have to die,” I said, adding as pointedly as I could: “Even if it is for the mission.”

Excepting certain cases of suicidal ideation and maybe some very specific sexual proclivities, people, in general, don't want to die. They want to survive if they can. I had to think the Undertakers were the same way. They told themselves it was their job, their duty, their mission, and that was why they were willing to blow themselves up. It sounded cool, sure, but when they learned it would all be for nothing, what would that do to them? These soldiers hadn't just popped into existence. They had families, probably friends, loved ones. And if they knew they were going to be remembered as those idiots who blew themselves up and *still* only helped the enemy, why would they ever throw their lives away?

I was wagering that they wouldn't.

"So hey, wait til we're at a safe distance before you set off those magical weapons, okay? Tell you what—we'll start a rumor that the Undertakers blew themselves up real good for the sake of the Kingdom."

The Undertakers still looked shocked, but not quite the same way as they had before. The unusual situation had gotten them all hyped up to destroy themselves, but now it was registering with them that it would be pointless—that other people might even think they were stupid for doing it.

What I'd said was a bluff, of course, but it wasn't a complete lie. It *would* be pointless for them to blow themselves up. We'd come here to rescue Falmelle-san, not to take over the Dragon's Den, so they definitely wouldn't gain anything. That part was totally true.

"Right, see you later. Or not," I said, turning my back on Myusel and the Undertakers, continuing the bluff. Falmelle-san was staring daggers at me, maybe because she thought I was abandoning her daughter, but I tried to make my smile say: "*C'mon, everyone, let's go.*"

"Good idea," Minori-san said, getting in on the act. "If we don't hurry, reclamation forces from Bahairam will show up." Given how important the Dragon's Den was, and how important the entire Third Capital was, there was every chance the Bahairamanian military would get involved here.

Then it was Amatena's turn: "No, wait, Shinichi. I think it would be better to make sure this lot blow themselves to pieces before we go. If even one of them

survives, word might get out that I'm a turncoat."

One by one, the Undertakers began to look at the ground. Until finally...

"Damn it all..." The Eleamachi soldier holding Myusel hostage let her go, giving her a shove. She took two or three stumbling steps, then looked back, surprised. But the Undertakers had lost all interest in her; their spirits seemed broken.

"Myusel!" Falmelle-san cried, rushing over and embracing her. Good. At least we had gotten Myusel back safely. The Undertakers must have decided there was no point using the imarufe bisurupeguze anymore, because they set the boxes on the ground and didn't look like they were going to go for them again.

All right. We were pulling this off, somehow. Man, forget cold sweat. I felt like my stomach was about to turn itself inside out. I let out a small breath of relief.

"Not bad, not bad at all," Theresa said from beside me, arms crossed. "But if you're going to make the most of this, you'd better do it quick."

"Huh...?"

"I've just had a report from our BOUs patrolling outside." Theresa tapped a finger against her temple. I guess she had some sort of ability to communicate with the nekkids—er, the BOUs, the things we called demi-humans. The genetically enhanced soldiers. This was when having a cyborg, or an android or whatever, came in handy. I wondered if the nekkids had communication devices embedded in their brains or what. But anyway...

"The—what did you call them?" Theresa said. "Bahairamanians? Anyway, the people who used to be here—a military unit that looks like one of theirs is advancing our position. The BOUs are engaging them, but it sounds like there's a lot of them."

"Really?" I stole a glance at the Undertakers, but they showed no special reaction. But then, Theresa wasn't wearing a magic ring, so they had no way to understand what she was saying. I guess Theresa probably realized that, or she wouldn't have said anything.

"They have a crest that looks like this..." And then, just like before, she placed her palm on the wall to produce a floating picture. It was a figure of a crest; not

a photograph, but sort of like a computer-generated image. It showed the flag of the Kingdom of Bahairam, and below it, a design that looked vaguely military. At least, that was all I could make out of it.

It was Amatena and Clara who reacted instead. “Where did that come from?”

“It’s the Eastern Second Unit...”

“I guess a unit with this emblem on their flag is heading this way,” I whispered to them.

Amatena gasped. “The Eastern Second Unit? But that means...”

“Your honored elder sister...” Clara said, and then she and Amatena leaned toward each other and held a whispered conference.

“Shinichi,” Amatena said to me. “Unless I’m mistaken, that unit is a decoy.”

“A decoy?”

“My older sister Jijilea is attached to the Eastern Second Unit. It’s led by a man who specializes in ambushes, surprise attacks, and general treachery. I wouldn’t expect a frontal assault from them.” She furrowed her brow.

“Surprise attacks,” I echoed. The words sounded so simple, but it was hard to guess what this leader might actually do. Whatever it was, though, the one thing that was clear was that he intended to take back the Dragon’s Den.

I said the first thing that came into my head: “If this were a bank heist or something, they would dig a tunnel underground.” And at that moment:

Boom.

“Huh?”

We all turned toward the rumble from deep within the facility, down the tunnel that led to the lower levels.

“Theresa?” I said.

“I don’t see any anomalies in the facility—wait. What’s that?” She looked just a little worried. Maybe even she, the administrator of the Dragon’s Den, with

immediate access to all its systems and communications, didn't know quite what was going on. But that would have to mean...

The next moment, soldiers in armor started pouring out of the tunnel.

Wait, did they seriously—?!

One of the soldiers brandished a sword and cried: "Kill them! Kill them all!"



The metal dragon danced into the air with a rush of wind, its wings spread wide. The scarlet Faldra took the lead, with the four green ones leaping into the brilliant blue behind it. They made a big circle in the sky, making sure everyone was accounted for, and then the transport unit for the forbidden armor went flying off to the west.

Standing there on the practice grounds watching them go, we heaved a sigh. In our heart of hearts, we wished we could be riding in that red Faldra, rushing off to help Shinichi. But the Empress of the Holy Eldant Empire could hardly be part of an infiltration mission into the Kingdom of Bahairam. Then there was the matter of Hikaru's story. We did not doubt it, of course not, but even if the world was in danger, the Eldant Empire, including our capital of Marinos, was currently suffering the effects of the earthquake. With fear spreading among the people, and other nations, not just Bahairam, circling like vultures, the empress could not leave the city.

"We will return to the castle," we informed the royal guard, then spun on our heel and headed for the carriage parked beside the practice ground.

But at that moment, someone cried: "Your Majesty!" It was Zahar and several soldiers, hurrying onto the grounds. The patches on the soldiers' shoulders indicated their various units—they appeared to be from the forces that oversaw the so-called "hyperspace tunnel" that connected our empire to Ja-pan. Then again, "overseeing" might be a strong term. They were mostly responsible for patrolling the area around the tunnel, and for operating the "lid" that had been placed on it after a close call involving the disappearance of magical power. The tunnel itself was not something any of us could control.

"What is going on?" we demanded. If Zahar had come all the way here to

summon us, it must be a matter of considerable concern.

“It’s— ahem—” Our prime minister was struggling to get the words out. This was unusual. Most unusual. “We... don’t exactly know,” he said finally.

“You don’t know,” we repeated. And yet Zahar had come here as if there was an emergency.

We looked at him, and Zahar wiped the sweat from his bald pate with a handkerchief as he said: “It’s rather unprecedented...”

“Your Majesty,” one of the soldiers said, “if you’ll forgive my saying so, I think it may be best for you to see for yourself.”

In other words, something was happening with the “hyperspace tunnel,” something all of them could tell was significant.

“Of all the times...” we mumbled, but then we realized: whatever was happening, could it, too, be related to the earthquake, and to whatever Shinichi and his friends were doing? And if so, perhaps whatever was going on with the tunnel was not mere happenstance, but deeply connected. “Very well. Show us,” we said, and climbed into the carriage.



The Dragon’s Den was absolute chaos. The Undertakers, suddenly confronted with reinforcements from a direction they had never expected, were at a loss how to respond. They’d been in a weird place, convinced by my chatter—my bluff—that even though agents of an enemy nation were inside their country’s most important military facility, they shouldn’t do anything. That even though, if these soldiers survived, they would almost certainly be held responsible for not stopping us, if they blew themselves up, they would only be helping the enemy. And just when they had finally started to give in, along came the cavalry.

If what Amatena said was true, though, the Undertakers didn’t necessarily get along with the rest of the military. Even if there wasn’t open fighting among the factions, it seemed the Undertakers were viewed with distaste by other soldiers. I guess it was only to be expected that friction like that would occur. Elite military units being at odds with the soldiers they encounter on the ground

is practically a trope in manga and anime.

So when the soldiers of the Eastern Second Unit, led by some dwarven sappers (they must have dug a tunnel with their magic to get in here), discovered the Undertakers were alive, they didn't actually look that thrilled. In fact, they almost seemed to ignore them, coming straight for us instead. It seemed to leave the Undertakers without a clear part to play. They hesitated to join the Eastern Second Unit for some reason, but they obviously couldn't join us and fight the other Bahairamanian soldiers. So instead they didn't do anything, watching as the scene descended into madness.

And then the Eastern Second Unit commander gave that order, "Kill them! Kill them all!" That left the Bahairamanian civilians, to say nothing of the people from Faugron & Associates, devastated. The Bahairamanians in particular were in a bind: it looked like if they tried to step forward to prove they weren't Eldant soldiers, they might be cut down by their own military.

Amatena and Clara were trying to put themselves between the Eastern Second Unit and the people. "Stop this! These people are—" But the soldiers didn't seem to be listening; they just attacked. Amatena and Clara each drew a dagger and parried the enemy's blows, but they were wildly outnumbered. Not to mention, they didn't really want to kill anyone from the Eastern Second Unit, so they were put purely on the defensive.

That was the last straw: Theresa snapped. "Listen, you shithead sons of bitches! You think you can just march into a person's house and start turning the place upside down?! I hope you came ready to go to your freaking graves for it!" Then she took a great leap—I could hear the *whack* as she kicked off the ground—and landed smack in the middle of the enemy forces. Her legs and arms, which had looked so delicate, whipped this way and that, catching every enemy soldier within reach and sending them flying.

Bam, bam, bambambam. The hits sounded too loud to be barehanded strikes. Maybe it was—you know. The sound of armor caving in under a blow. Geez! Was she crunching armor with her bare hands?

"Wh-Who the hell is this?!"

"Damn, she's strong!"

The Eastern Second Unit started to lose cohesion.

For one thing, Theresa wasn't a human, she was an avatar. Milspec. She had obviously been designed for hand-to-hand combat. And if her unit was anything like Hikaru-san's, it was probably a "slime" that was only temporarily in human form. Slice it, stab it, it wasn't likely to do a lot of good.

But one person is still just one person. There had to be at least a hundred enemy soldiers, and Theresa wasn't going to hold them off all alone. Then again, if she were less interested in protecting us than in simply murdering everyone in the Eastern Second Unit, she might actually have managed it—eventually.

In any event, the end result was soldiers collapsed on the ground all around Theresa.

"Shinichi-kun!"

"Shinichi-sama!"

Minori-san and Elvia dove between me and a group of soldiers coming my way. Minori-san must have decided she couldn't use her gun in the melee, because she was holding a military-issue knife. Elvia, meanwhile, was going hand-to-hand with the soldiers.

"You stinking—!" Elvia folded her fingers back and struck an opponent forcefully with the palm of her hand (it looked a bit like a cat punch, I've gotta say), then kicked out her leg and swept another guy's feet out from under him. Come to think of it, I hadn't seen her go on the attack very often, but she was a werewolf just like her older sister Amatenas, and she could do some damage when she wanted to.

As for Minori-san, well, that went without saying. This was someone who had once roundhouse-kicked a dragon, and stood toe to toe with Amatenas (again, a werewolf). So despite the craziness all over, I was actually pretty safe.

"You airheads!"

"Mud-loving shrimps!"

Not far away, Myusel, Falmelle-san, and the Faugron people were using their

wind magic against the soldiers. They seemed to be in a sort of magic showdown with the dwarves who had been the first to burst in, but there wasn't too much stabbing or punching going on. I wondered if it was really the historic enmity between elves and dwarves that had caused the sappers to go straight for Myusel and the others. The two groups were actually starting to get along in Eldant, but these were Bahairamanian soldiers, so I guess some open hostility was understandable.

"Shinichi-sama—" Myusel seemed to be trying to keep one eye on me, but there were Eastern Second Unit soldiers all over between us, and she couldn't get to me. In fact, it might be more dangerous for her to carelessly try to link up with me than it would be to stay where she was.

"There's too damn many of 'em!" Theresa shouted, even as she fought like a lion—or maybe I should say a god of destruction. Well, she was right. We could put our backs to the walls in this large room, so we weren't in danger of being surrounded and snuffed out, but there were still only about thirty of us total, and at least a hundred of the enemy. Three times our number, even by the roughest calculation. And the Eastern Second Unit soldiers seemed to have realized how dangerous Theresa was, because they were keeping their distance from her, firing magic or stabbing at her with their swords to pin her in place.

"And I can't call back the BOUs from outside!" Theresa added.

"Oh, uh... Oh."

Theresa had sent the BOUs—the nekkids and dragons and stuff—outside in the first place to patrol for trouble, but now they were engaged with the Eastern Second Unit, which had the city surrounded on three sides. It was sort of guerrilla warfare, hitting and running, slowing them down, and bringing the BOUs back into the Den would mean practically inviting the rest of the Eastern Second Unit in with them. Worst-case scenario, we could end up caught in a pincers movement between them and the soldiers we were already fighting.

Ugh... Could we be in even bigger trouble than it looked like?!

I backed up Elvia and Minori-san with Tifu Murottsu as I tried desperately to think of something.

"Argh, this is all just one giant *pain in the ass*!" Theresa yelled, and then there

was a *thump* as she took another stupendous leap. She somersaulted through the air, landing squarely between me and Minori-san. She placed one of her hands on the nape of Minori-san's neck, and the other on my forehead.

"Huh?" I said. "H-Hey, what are you—"

"We're not getting anywhere like this," Theresa said. "And we can't get to the BOUs. But I can temporarily grant full administrative privileges for this facility to full-blooded humans. Here goes!"

"No, wait—what does that even mean?!" I cried, but Theresa didn't look in any mood to explain. The next instant, a soft, blue-white glow emanated from her palms against my head and Minori-san's neck. It didn't hurt; it wasn't even warm. But then...

"Wha?"

I had this feeling. I can't quite explain it, but it was like my senses had... changed, ever so slightly. I didn't know what Theresa had done to me, but she was already done doing it; she jumped back into the fray with the Eastern Second Unit, leaving me and Minori-san to fend for ourselves.

That didn't seem, you know, great for us. What was going on?

"Shinichi-kun!" Minori-san cried, snapping me back to reality. I saw three soldiers from the Eastern Second Unit rushing toward us. I reflexively intoned the Tifu Murottso spell I'd been using, but to my shock, before I had finished chanting—practically the moment I brought my hands up—a massive Tifu Murottso blew the soldiers backward. It even caught up some of the guys behind them.

"Huh?!"

Wh—What was this all about? The power was incredible, and I hadn't even chanted the entire spell...

"I increased your interface privileges with the micromachines by two levels," Theresa told us, even as she continued fighting. Some of the soldiers out there were Eleamachi tribespeople, and it looked like they had decided to gang up on her. Even Theresa was struggling against these opponents. She wasn't going to be sending them toppling like bowling pins the way she had with those first

enemies. “Only within this building,” she added. “The facility’s communications network will handle the calculations, so you don’t have to know what it’s doing. Imagine a way to take down some enemies and then use it!”

Huh? So, uh, what did that mean? The micromachines she mentioned—those were what they called sprites here in this world. And now we had increased “interface privileges” with them... Did that mean we could use the micromachines more easily? In other words, that we could use more magic...?!

“Hold on... So...” I decided to test it out the most famous way I knew how: I pulled my right arm back. I stuck my left arm forward. I placed my palms by my hip and cried, “*Kaaaamehaaaaaameee—*”

Store it up, store it up!

“Shinichi-kun? What are you doing?!” Minori-san said. Guess she hadn’t caught on yet.

Me, I shouted: “—*ha!!*”

A ray of light burst from my outstretched palms and slammed into the Eastern Second Unit soldiers.



Yes! It worked, it really worked!

Not only that, but my body felt unusually light and agile, like the micromachines were helping me move. Was this sort of like having an invisible power-assist suit?

“Minori-san, I think we’ve got a chance!” I said, clenching my fist. The word *CLENCH!* briefly appeared above my fist before fading into the air. Holy crap, we even got sound effects! “Just think of a technique, shout out the name—and you’ll get it!” I said, twisting my hips as far as they would go, far enough to challenge my joints. Wow! I was immediately surrounded by onomatopoeia reading *RM RM RM RM*. I was totally just like Joj*! Awesome!

“*What* are you talking about?”

“I mean like manga and anime and stuff! We can straight-up use those attacks!”

“I’ve never heard anything so stupid...” Minori-san said, but even as she spoke she took a wide stance and exclaimed, “Eight-Hundred-Style Ha***kyu?!” And then she kicked the empty air. Suddenly a massive soccer ball or something appeared and went flying away as if she had kicked it, producing *SHOING!* and *BONK* sound effects as it trailed circles behind it in the air.

Naturally, all the soldiers in its way were knocked over. Talk about power. It sort of seemed to me like maybe Amaten, Clara, and a few of the Faugron people had been caught up by the rampaging soccer ball, but... eh, they all got to their feet again after a second, so I guess it was fine.

“The heck was that?” I asked.

“Uh, it’s something one of the characters uses in *Prince of Soccer*,” said Minori-san, sounding a bit startled by her own performance. “Maybe I should have stopped at Twenty-One-Style?”

“Looks like a little bit goes a long way, doesn’t it?” I said, but Minori-san and I both got what was happening now. Just picture a move, and it would happen! With sound effects and everything! It was awesome! We were literally in cheat mode.

This meant we could do famous moves like the Hokuto Hyaku*****ken or the Futae ** Kiwami or the Kimen Fla** or the Tiro Fi**le or the Dismember*** Halo or the Galactica Mag**m or the Bo*****ken or the Hardening Pu*ch or the Bourei**goku or the Eternal Force Blizz**d or the Diamon* Eternal or the [remainder omitted] as often as we wanted!

“Heh. Heh heh heh... Hoo hoo hoo hoo hoo!”

Oops. Did I laugh like that out loud?

Anyway, Minori-san and I lined up, striking poses and chortling joyfully enough to make everyone else take a step back. Then I cried, “You’re finished!” (it was the first cool action-hero-like thing that popped into my head) and waded in.

It was enough to make a guy wish for some Vertical Maneuvering Equipment.

But anyway...

“Zangief’s Super Uryah Jou!”

“Sonic Boom!”

“Bro, get outta the way, I can’t kill her!”

“Catharsis **ve!”

“Fina* tiiime!”

“Your barrage is weak! What are you doing?!”

.....And so on and so forth. We shouted out every technique and move we could think of (even if some of them did seem a little bit off somehow), trusting to luck to hit the Eastern Second Unit soldiers and send them sprawling. It felt like I was starring in my own *Dy***** Warriors* game. Maybe call it *Isekai War****** or something. The fun was in seeing how high you could drive the combo.

“What the hell are these people?!”

“This is ridiculaarrghh!”

“H—Help me!”

The Eastern Second Unit was in an uproar to see me and Minori-san suddenly

turn so powerful. All they could do was gibber and shout. Especially about me, the guy who had looked like a shrimpy loser hiding behind a girl and providing covering fire with his magic.

Now the tables were turning. But then:

“Ah—ahh—ahhhh!”

Perhaps terrified by our sudden ability to fight like demons (or, uh, gods or something?), one of the Undertakers let out a deranged yell—just as Myusel and Falmelle-san were passing by him. And there at his feet was one of the abandoned imarufe bisurupeguze...

I gasped as the soldier shoved what appeared to be a key card into the bomb.

Crap!

Myusel, meanwhile, turned and ran toward the bomb, her hand outstretched. She must have been hoping to surround the explosion with wind magic to minimize the damage. The battle gear Petralka had given her strengthened her magic powers and would allow her to produce a spell many times stronger than normal. I’m sure that’s what she was banking on, but it was still an impossible plan.

“Um, uh, uhhhh,” I squawked in her direction. Then I cried: “*Barrier!!*” In my mind, I pictured a force field surrounding and containing the imarufe bisurupeguze. You know, something that looked barrier-ish. No sooner had I done so than the bomb filled the meter-ish in diameter space I imagined and exploded.

There was a muted *bagoom!* and the barrier glowed brightly. Flames licked at the force field for several seconds afterward, but they quickly disappeared, leaving only a patch of scorched ground exactly the shape of my barrier, with a big hole in the floor right in the center. Thirty centimeters wide, I’d guess. No telling how deep it was, but probably not deep enough for a person to hide in.

“Thank god,” I said, letting out a breath. “It worked.” I mean, I had been seriously improvising there.

“Shinichi-sama!” Myusel said, turning toward me, her eyes wide. She must have been shocked that my “barrier” had managed to completely suppress the

imarufe bisurupeguze. Heck, so was I.

But there was something more important. “Myusel,” I said, “don’t do anything so crazy ever again.” When I’d seen her go running for the bomb, I’d literally felt my blood turn cold. “I think you took a few years off my life.”

“S-Sorry, sir,” she said, but she was still smiling: all’s well that ends well.

Except it hadn’t ended.

“Huh...?”

There was an audible *crack*, and then fissures started radiating out from the scorched hole in the floor. Straight toward Myusel.

“Oh no!” she cried. The cave-in happened in an instant. She seemed to be floating in midair—and then she disappeared into the rapidly expanding pit.

“Myusel!” I shouted, running up to the edge of the fissure she’d dropped into. “Myusel—Myusel?!” I called again and again, but there was no response. The area around the pit was weirdly warm, maybe from radiant heat. It was like having your face too close to a heater; you could tell you could get burned just by staying there too long. I gritted my teeth, though, and gazed down into the three-meter-wide hole.

To my surprise, I discovered a series of holes: through the crack in the ground I could see another one on the next level, and then another one, going down at least three floors. Wait...

“Is this my fault?!” I exclaimed. By containing the imarufe bisurupeguze inside my barrier, had I inadvertently taken advantage of the Munroe Effect, focusing the energy of the explosion on a single point and thereby blasting through several layers of this facility?!

Incidentally, the Munroe Effect (sometimes called the Neumann Effect) is what’s behind modern shaped explosive charges, especially those used in tank cannons and anti-tank missiles. In a word, it focuses the explosive power of the gunpowder on a single point, creating a blast with tremendous speed and heat that’s able to pierce even thick armor. It works on a similar principle to concave mirrors and parabolic antennas.

Then again, it was always possible that the Dragon's Den had simply been weakened by the passage of time and a few good earthquakes. But whatever the case, unfortunately, I was the one who had given it that final push.

"Myusel!!" I squinted against the heat, but three floors down it was dark and I couldn't really see anything. Including any sign of Myusel. The pit simply swallowed my gaze and my voice, as if it led straight down to hell.

My face was battered by hot wind. I didn't think it had come from the bomb. It was obviously blowing up from whatever was down there.

Is that the effect of the reactor? The reactor was supposed to be on the very lowest level. Maybe this heat was escaping from the rogue device. And I'd just given the hot air somewhere to go. That was my guess.

Fall down into temperatures like that, and it might not kill you immediately... but it wouldn't be fun.

"Myuseeeelllll!" I shouted as loud as I could, but there was no answer.

Chapter Three: Fire? Fire!!

Five pairs of wings cut through the bright blue sky.

Faldras flew via wind magic cast on their wings, so they didn't "flap" to speak of, but there wasn't any engine sound, either. The ride was smooth and quiet. Well, quiet except for the roar of wind rushing past us. From the ground, though, I imagined the Faldras would have been nearly silent.

The forbidden armor delivery unit successfully crossed the border and entered Bahairamanian territory. It was possible one of the Bahairamanian Army units on the ground near the crossing spotted us, but from below, it would have been awfully difficult to tell a Faldra from a real dragon. The only things that might have given us away were the unnatural touches, like the fact that we were flying in formation, or that just one dragon was bright red. At this rate, it would take us barely another hour to reach the Third Capital.

For the record, we were currently strapped into seats on the Faldras' backs. Thankfully, that meant we couldn't look straight down and get vertigo, but on the other hand, we could look out over the wings and see the scenery stretching away as far as the eye could see.

With a small handful of major exceptions like Holy Eldant Castle, there were no very tall buildings in this world. That meant you didn't have to gain a lot of height in order to see a very, very long way. Getting up higher lets you see more: it can change your perspective on the world.

There was an astronaut once, quite a while ago, who said that "a person who has known the vastness of space is never the same again," an indictment of the foolishness of human division and hostility. I might not have been as high up as he was, but flying through the air, I was starting to think I understood what he meant.

"This is quite something," Minister Garius en Cordobal breathed. The knight had a reserved beauty, and always came across as calm and composed, but at that moment his pale face was tinged with visible excitement. He didn't share

my twenty-first-century experience of flying in an airplane, or Loek and Romilda's experience of having previously operated a Faldra. This was all new to him. So the shock was that much larger, the emotion that much greater, the impact unmistakable.

"Are you frightened, sir?" I asked, but Minister Cordobal gave me a wry smile and shook his head. "No. In fact, I feel rather more calm than I expected to. I thought there would be more shaking—but this Faldra is steadier than a carriage."

"That's flying for you, I guess," I said. None of the bumps and dips that made ground travel so bouncy. Of course, I didn't know what would happen to us if we hit any turbulence...

"Are those the Welhoss Mountains?" Minister Cordobal said to himself, looking to the north. I could tell from his tone that he was impressed, even moved, and I said, "You mean those mountains over there?"

It didn't strike me as much of a mountain range: not very steep or tall, more like the hill equivalent of a kid just starting to grow his first mustache. The mountain range that spanned the border between Bahairam and Eldant was craggy and mean and looked like it would take forever to cross on foot, but not these mountains.

"Oh, it's nothing," Minister Cordobal said, shaking his head. "When I was younger, I once spent time studying in the country on the far side of those mountains."

"Oh..." I said. So that was it. He was talking about Zwelberich, a country there had been some friction with a while back, when their fifth (or was that sixth?) prince had wanted to marry Petralka. Rumor had it that this prince—Rubert was his name—had once been Minister Cordobal's lover.

Minister Cordobal looked wistful, a little sad... In short, if Minori-san had been here, she would have been beside herself. As for me, I had no special interest in BL. So I didn't make any tactless remarks, just quietly looked forward again. At least until Romilda, sitting in front of us piloting the Faldra, called out, "Huh?!" (Loek, meanwhile, was busy being the engineer, focusing on keeping the wind magic flowing over the wings.)

“What happened?” I asked.

“There was a shadow...” Romilda mumbled.

Just at that moment, we gasped as a dark shadow enveloped us. Which had to mean it was...

“Above us?!” I instinctively looked up to see a strange, dark shape calmly keeping pace with the Faldra, as steady as if we were casting a shadow on the sky. But that was no shadow—it was the real thing!

“*Dragon!*” I cried. The dragon probably didn’t care what I said, but it just so happened that at exactly that moment, the great, dark creature arced its huge neck slightly and looked at us. I could see what appeared to be a metal spike driven deep into its head.

“Puppet drake!” Minister Cordobal said. “One of Bahairam’s?”

He was right. We knew what these were: Bahairam’s living weapons. And it was right above us...

“Crap, my magic!” Loek exclaimed.

“Romilda, get us some distance,” Minister Cordobal instructed.

“Believe me, I’m trying!”

Our Faldra began a large circle, but the puppet drake followed us. I looked back and saw the other Faldras likewise accosted by other puppet drakes.

The dragons of this world were said to be part-sprite. That meant offensive magic pretty much didn’t work against them. Or more precisely, the moment the magic got close to them, it was absorbed by the dragon’s magic-metabolizing system and the spell would fail to manifest any real power.

And it wasn’t just offensive magic that was affected. A nearby dragon would weaken and eventually extinguish other kinds of magic, too. Like the dwarven puppetry spells that worked the Faldra’s innards—or the wind magic that kept it flying. And you can guess what would happen then.

I saw our rear guard take some direct body slams from the puppet drake; their Faldras went into tailspins.

“It’s no good, I can’t shake him!” Romilda cried. It looked like the Bahairamanian dragon had the upper hand in maneuverability.

“Have they known about us since we crossed the border?” Minister Cordobal said, a pained expression on his face.

This wasn’t the first time a Faldra had entered Bahairamanian airspace, after all: Loek and Romilda had brought one to rescue Shinichi-san after he was kidnapped. And the production of the Faldras was something of a point of pride in Eldant. So it shouldn’t have been surprising if Bahairam had gotten word that Eldant had a new weapon that looked like a dragon. And if you knew something about how real dragons looked and behaved, the way the Faldras were flying would probably have seemed off. Who could blame Bahairam for taking us for an incursion force from the Eldant Empire and sending their drakes after us?

I didn’t see anyone riding on the backs of the puppet drakes, which made me think the wizards controlling them had to be nearby somewhere, but I had no idea where that might be, or even how far the puppetry magic could reach.

“This doesn’t look good...” I said. We were really in trouble. At this rate, every one of us was going to be shot down. Even if we managed not to wind up as a smoking crater in the ground, this was costing us time. Time we needed to get the forbidden armor to the Dragon’s Den before that reactor blew...

“We’re going down! We’re going down! Loek!”

“There’s nothing I can do! My magic—”

“Oh, for... arrrgh—!” Romilda pulled hard on a control-stick-like thing at her seat. There was a metallic sound and the Faldra’s wings, which had been moving lazily up and down, locked into place. At the same time, the movement of the tail suddenly became quick and mechanical. Presumably this was some kind of backup control system for emergency situations when magic wasn’t working. We had been losing altitude fast without Loek’s spells, but now our Faldra leveled off and drifted along. At least we hadn’t done a nose dive into the ground. But we weren’t in for a soft landing.

“Yikesyikesyikesyikes!” Romilda said. There was a series of violent impacts as the fuselage bounced along the ground, tearing up chunks of earth. Normally we would have landed neatly on the Faldra’s feet, but without magic, we

couldn't control them, and instead had to land directly on the body.

"Well, this isn't good." Minister Cordobal had undone his seatbelt and stood up, looking overhead. The other Faldras were being forced to land just like we were. Above the false dragons that had been run into the ground, real, albeit magically controlled, dragons circled.

Faldras didn't have any air-combat capability, but the puppet drakes did have that most famous of dragon abilities, fiery breath. If any of that stuff came raining down from above us, we'd be roasted before we knew what was happening. We could try to protect ourselves with magic, but all the dragons would have to do was get a little closer.

This was bad. We were out of cards to play. The best we could hope for would be to try to run as fast as we could.

"Grr..." Minister Cordobal grabbed a bow and arrows he'd stashed beside his seat for a crisis just like this. "Hikaru!" he shouted. "Take the forbidden armor and run! I'll hold them here!"

"Minister Cordobal?!" I said. He fired one arrow after another, but he had no chance of hitting dragons who could move freely in the sky. I'm sure he knew he wasn't going to bring those things down that way. He was just bait, a delaying tactic so the rest of us could get away with the armor. And yet...

"It's impossible!" I said. Even packed up into a wooden crate, the forbidden armor would be hard to handle. It would be difficult at best for me, Loek, and Romilda to escape with it. Even if it was light enough to carry, just think how hard it would be trying to run along with what amounted to a huge piece of luggage. Maybe we could tie a rope to it and try to drag it behind us, but I didn't think the drakes would wait politely for us to get that set up.

"Hrm," Minister Cordobal grunted.

It was hopeless. We were done for. Two puppet drakes closed in the above us, their jaws open to dispense the deadly flame.

"Huh?" It happened literally out of the blue: no context, just happened. "What?!"

Everything around us changed.

Oh, the “cast of characters,” so to speak, stayed the same. We and the Faldra and the puppet drakes were there. But the scene around us went from a wasteland of sand and rocks to something... else. A vortex of rainbow-colored light sprang up, and the sky and the earth all ran together. Streaks of color were painted over the parched landscape, and now the brush seemed to be going crazy.

“Whoa, whoa, what’s happening?!” Loek exclaimed, his panic letting me know that whatever this was, it wasn’t something that was normal in this world.

“This... It can’t be...” Only Minister Cordobal seemed to have some idea what might be going on. And then the two dragons who’d had their mouths open to attack us—and in fact, even the three others—slowly drifted to the ground in a wide spiral and landed. They folded their wings, bowed their heads, and sat still where they were. It was like if you told an obedient dog, “Sit.”

“Is this... Bewitching magic?” Minister Cordobal said.

“Bewitching?” I said, tilting my head in confusion. Did he mean all this was just an illusion? But even if it were, why had the puppet drakes stopped attacking us?

“Huh,” someone said from behind us, interrupting my thoughts. “Close shave, eh?”

I know that voice!

“So it’s you. I might have guessed,” Minister Cordobal replied. The emotions in his tone were, well... complicated. “Rubert.”

“Gracious, don’t act too happy to see me, Garius. I know it’s been a while, but... well, not that long, I suppose.”

Mounted on a massive riding bird was the Prince of Zwelberich—Rubert. He didn’t appear to have any entourage with him; it was as if he had simply popped up out of nowhere. In its suddenness, his appearance was almost as surprising as the change of scenery.

“Why are you here?” Minister Cordobal said.

“Why? You ask why?” Prince Rubert shrugged his shoulders and grinned. “It

was Eldant that went to all the trouble of sending an urgent magical communiqué to Zwelberich. Unless that was merely the meddling of that old man Zahar, and you knew nothing about it?” Rubert seemed to be enjoying this.

Minister Cordobal frowned. “No, we—”

It was true that Minister Cordobal and Prime Minister Zahar had agreed to send urgent communications to other nearby countries in hopes of avoiding any interference by third parties. Even I knew that. Maybe they’d included notice that Minister Garius en Cordobal would be part of the Faldra unit entering Bahairam. And maybe Prince Rubert had seen that, come to the border with Eldant and Bahairam, and watched things develop. That was my speculation, anyway. It would be easy enough to claim that he was just keeping an eye on the situation at the border.

Come to think of it, Zwelberich has highly developed mind-control magic, don’t they?

So this weird stuff that seemed to be happening, was it the same sort of spell?

“Let’s say I just happened by,” Rubert said, grinning again. “You’re not the only ones who know about Bahairam’s puppet drakes. I was simply making sure our defenses were ready and that we have a plan should we need one. My good luck that it proved the perfect opportunity to try out one of our little stratagems in actual combat.”

According to Prince Rubert, the spell he used took advantage of amplified communications magic, and was designed to interact not with the dragons themselves, but with the magical formulae in the spikes in their heads, so as to minimize the chances of its being thwarted by the dragons’ magical metabolism. This meant, he said, that there was a good chance that the wizards controlling the puppet drakes, or at least the people operating the magical spikes, were somewhere nearby—if not right with the dragons, they would be within visual range.

I guess this magic worked a bit like radio control. These days, stuff that could be controlled electronically, like drones, was ubiquitous, but even then, whoever was controlling them had to be able to see what was going on around the drone. If they were too far away, they wouldn’t be able to respond to

whatever happened. So Prince Rubert and Minister Cordobal seemed to infer that if the drakes' pilots weren't actually riding on the creatures, they must be close. By blanketing the entire area in mind control magic, or bewitching magic or whatever it was, the prince could startle the pilots and slow down them and the puppet drakes. That would give us time to find whoever was controlling these monsters and subdue them, whereupon hopefully the puppet drakes would wait obediently for their next command.

"I'm hearing a lot of *maybes* and speculation," Minister Cordobal said.

"Of course you are. This is an experiment," Prince Rubert responded, smiling easily. "Or what? Do you suppose I rode as fast and as hard as I could, running my mount ragged, and rushed here just to rescue you?"

Minister Cordobal frowned even deeper and refused to meet Prince Rubert's eyes. Oh, hey, he was blushing.

"Then I suppose I needn't thank you," he managed to squeeze out after a moment.

"Certainly not."

"Then we'll take our leave. We're in quite a hurry." Minister Cordobal returned his bow and arrows to the spot by his seat, and ordered Loek and Romilda to lift off immediately.

Prince Rubert watched this with an amused look on his face. "Garius," he called after us.

"Yes, what?"

"Be careful, you hear me? You play cool, but I know you can let passion get the better of you at times."

There was a beat, and then Minister Cordobal said somewhat stiffly, "I thank you for your advice."

The next instant, Prince Rubert vanished like smoke.

"Oh!" I said.

"Even his very presence here was part of the bewitchment," Minister Cordobal said. "Smoke and mirrors, all of it. How very like him."

“Huh...” Now I understood why Prince Rubert hadn’t had anyone with him. If he was just a projection, then there was no need for bodyguards. The real prince, the physical one, was probably a short distance away, working with several other wizards to pull off this feat of large-scale bewitching magic. They weren’t trying to cast their spells directly on the dragons, so being at a distance probably helped prevent the magic from being absorbed by the monsters. It was actually a pretty good strategy to counter the puppet drakes.

There was a chance Prince Rubert and his mages hadn’t even crossed the Zewelberich-Bahairam border. I didn’t know what the effective range of magic like that was. It would be a terrific way to help out: they hadn’t used offensive magic, and maybe they hadn’t even entered Bahairamanian territory, so even if the Bahairamanians found out about it later, it would be easy to dismiss any diplomatic responsibility.

Had Prince Rubert really used Minister Cordobal as nothing more than part of an experiment in a national defense strategy? Or was even that explanation part of the deception?

Loek and Romilda were looking at each other as if they wanted to say something, but they were silent as the Faldra lifted into the air. Probably a wise decision. Always a good plan not to make any smart remarks about someone else’s love life.

As Loek began working his wind magic again, the five Faldras slowly gained altitude. The scenery was still weird, like flying through a kaleidoscope, but now that we knew it was just an illusion, we could ignore it and head for our destination.

“We’re losing time,” Minister Cordobal said firmly, as if to make clear that all that had just happened was behind us. “Let’s go!”



We were still locked in battle with the Eastern Second Unit. Minori-san and Theresa and I between us had mauled them pretty good with our antics, and the unit was having trouble responding cohesively—but individual soldiers were still fighting. We weren’t exactly whittling down their numbers, either. In hopes

of not involving our friends and allies—people like Falmelle-san and the Faugron staff, and the Bahairamanian citizens, not to mention Elvia, Amatena, and Clara—I was fighting with the proverbial one hand behind my back, not killing the enemy soldiers, just knocking them down. But all too often, that meant they got right back up.

“Myuuuseee!!!”

It didn’t help that I wasn’t actually, you know, fighting right now. I had other things to worry about. I’d lost track of how many times I had shouted Myusel’s name down into the huge crevice. But all I got in response was a face full of scalding hot air. Nothing from Myusel. Maybe she was too deep to hear me. Or maybe she couldn’t answer. Or maybe...

“Shinichi-sama!”

For a second, I thought the voice had come from the hole... but it was from behind me. It was Clara, rushing up and grabbing my arms as I had been about to tumble into the fissure. Clara wasn’t very large and looked young, but she was still a weretiger, and that meant she was awfully strong. She dragged me away from the edge, and I fell down on my behind.

“Shinichi!” Amatena shouted. She and Elvia were fighting nearby, I guess to keep me safe. Like I said, the Eastern Second Unit people hadn’t given up yet. If anything, they had redoubled their attack, sensing an opportunity when I left the battle. “Focus on the fight in front of you!” Amatena ordered.

“But I—! But Myusel—!”

“She may already be dead,” Clara said bluntly, giving voice to the one thought I had refused to even put into words.

“No! That’s ridiculous, what are you—”

“The only thing you’ll find here is air hot enough to make you sweat,” Clara said. Her tone was flat as ever, almost as if she didn’t feel emotion. “I don’t believe it’s merely the heat from the imarufe bisurupeguze, either. Deep down there—”

“Shut *up*!” I shouted, almost before I could think. I felt Clara, still holding my arms, quake with surprise.

“Shinichi-sama...” For the first time, she almost sounded scared.

That snapped me back to myself. “Argh, I—I’m sorry. But...” I looked back over my shoulder at her as I spoke. “I’m basically in invincibility mode right now...”

Theresa had increased our authority or privileges or something, so that we could use magic without so much as an incantation, just by picturing what we wanted to happen. Nothing should have been impossible for me. Nothing should have been so hard.

“Shinichi!” Amatena said again. “I know how you must be feeling, but if you jump into that hole it’ll only mean another lost ally.”

Elvia added her voice to the chorus: “Y’ can’t do it, Shinichi-sama! I know you’re worried about Myusel—I am, too, but y’ just can’t!”

“I told you, the way I am now, I would be all right...”

“No, I think you’d better not!” Theresa said from a distance away, her voice shockingly cold. “The privileges I granted you only work inside this facility, and they only work where the administrative system is functioning properly. I don’t think they’d do you any good anywhere near that reactor. The micromachines might still exist there, but they won’t have access to the calculation functions of the network. You’d have to give every single one individual instructions.”

“So you’re saying—”

“I’m saying you won’t be popping any fireballs out of your hands or what the hell ever.”

That brought me up short. I should have realized it. If “administrative privileges” or whatever gave you control over the micromachines—that is to say, allowed you to use magic freely—then there wouldn’t have been any need for the forbidden armor. But the high temperatures around the reactor were preventing the nanomachines there from using the network’s calculation capabilities. In other words, communications with that area were cut off.

Argh, dammit! Stupid, stupid logic!

Myusel—Myusel was down there. And it was because of me. Because I made

a split-second choice to screw up. If she was dead...

I looked up, and my eyes happened to meet those of Falmelle-san. She'd been about to jump into that pit herself, but her subordinates had just managed to hold her back. She seemed to be doing a better job than I was of regaining her composure, though, because she just cast her eyes to the ground, clearly in pain.

No! No, you can't give up! You of all people!

I almost let the words come out of my mouth in a yell, but I just stopped myself. I was sure she didn't *want* to give up on her daughter. She'd just realized that flinging herself into that hole wouldn't do anyone any good.

But then...

"Huh?" Among the ringing of swords and shouting of soldiers and general chaos, I heard a voice, clearly and distinctly. I can't say how I was able to hear it over the din. Maybe because it belonged to someone I knew.

"What? What are the two of you doing here?"

Yes. It was someone I'd met once before...

Elvia was the first to call her name: "Big Sis Jiji?!"

I looked toward the voice in shock. There was Elvia and Amatena's older sister, Jijilea Harneiman. Unlike when we'd met at the mansion, she was wearing light armor, a sword hanging at her hip—you couldn't miss her. She looked practically identical to Elvia and Amatena, but she gave a completely different impression. There was none of her sisters' mischievous streak, and while she was beautiful, she also came across as the consummate tactician. In a word, not someone you really wanted to mess with.

"Jijilea! Order them to stop fighting, now! This battle is meaningless!" Amatena shouted.

"Hm?" Jijilea responded, and for an instant she tilted her head, so calm she almost looked out of place, and simply gazed at us. "But this boy—Shinichi, was it? And the woman. They're from Eldant, are they not?" She was looking at Minori-san. "And is Eldant not trying to take over the Dragon's Den? The boy

himself said something about laying the groundwork for a further invasion.”

“No, Shinichi was—”

But before Amatena could explain, the doors of the Dragon’s Den opened with a great crash. Something huge, the size of a dragon, had kicked open the massive doors. And it seemed to be looking right at us...

“Speedy delivery!”

“You moron!” Minori-san shouted—at Loek, who was standing proudly atop a red Faldra.

“Huh?” he said. “Wha? Minori-san...”

“Could your timing *be* any worse?”

I had to agree. Through complete coincidence, the leader of the group that had infiltrated the Dragon’s Den from below turned out to be Jijilea, and she could have helped put a stop to this pointless fighting. We had been so close. But there was going to be no explaining this.

So, screw it.

“What took you so long?” I demanded, rushing up to the foot of Loek’s Faldra.

“Huh? Shinichi-sensei?”

“Umm...”

Loek—and beside him, Romilda—were taken aback to find themselves upbraided not just by Minori-san, but even by me. Now that I was a little closer, I could see they weren’t the only ones on the Faldra; Hikaru-san and Garius were there, too.

“What do you mean, so long?” Hikaru-san said. “We went as fast as—”

“Myusel fell in that hole! I need the forbidden armor or we’ll never get her back!” I said.

“In the— Oh...” Hikaru-san had apparently noticed the fissure.

“Just give it to me! Give me the forbidden armor!”

“I’m goin’, too!” Elvia exclaimed, rushing over. “Y’all brought one for me,

didn't you?!"

"Ahem, yes, of course. And we have Myusel Faurant's suit as well," Garius replied. Like the others, he didn't seem to quite grasp what was going on. Not that I could really blame him.

"We'll take that, too. Just give it to us!" I smacked the Faldra's side to emphasize my sense of urgency.

Thankfully, the Eastern Second Unit, Jijilea included, was so startled by what had happened that they hadn't reacted yet. They'd probably never seen an actual Faldra before, and on top of that, they saw me and Minori-san getting very upset with Loek and the others despite the fact that these were obviously reinforcements. We could add them to the list of people this stuff wasn't making sense to.

Unfortunately, it wasn't quite confusing enough to make them call a halt to the fighting.

"Amatena, Elvia, what's going on here? Explain this to me!" I heard Jijilea saying irritably behind me. Meanwhile, Elvia and I grabbed the crates of forbidden armor off the Faldra's back and wrenched them open.

I was just reaching for mine when Theresa, still beating up on the Bahairamanian soldiers, shouted, "Hey, kid—Shinichi! Start it up in maintenance mode!"

"Maintenance what? Huh?"

"You know by now that the Iron Crab is supposed to be for women. Not a lot of fun for a guy, even in emergency mode. Maintenance mode disables the F-type's waste-disposal unit, so your crotch ought to be a little more comfortable!"

"Okay, but I'll tell you what I'm *not* comfortable with—girls saying words like *crotch*!" I cried.

Still, it was pretty good advice. The whole thing with this armor being made for females did make things pretty uncomfortable for me. I did recall the armor saying something flippant about how I was plenty small enough to enable the emergency mode, but let's just say I wasn't always that small!

Look, it was bearable during an emergency, but if anything got, you know, even the slightest bit bigger, there was a whole lot of pressure—like, enough to make me regret having been born a man. It wasn't an experience I was eager to repeat. But I guess by enabling this maintenance mode or whatever, I could disable the part that put so much pressure on my, uh, parts. Maybe "maintenance" meant maintenance on the armor, and the "waste-disposal unit" was retracted to make things easier to clean and disinfect.

"Shinichi-sama!" Elvia was already in her armor and urging me to hurry up.

"Right, right! Uhh... Start up in maintenance mode... Please?" I said to the armor in the box, and then I reached out my hand.



I was lucky I had been right in the middle of using a wind magic spell. I believe the magical garments gifted to me by Her Majesty played a major part, as well. Whatever the case, I was still alive and uninjured, though I had fallen from a substantial height. The wind swirling around me had formed a series of layers and softened my landing, not to mention protected me from what was down there in the pit.

"It's so hot..."

A brutal heat awaited me down here. Even with the protection of the magic, I felt as if it could scorch my skin. Without it—well, I suppose I would already have died when I hit the ground, but if I hadn't, the heat would quickly have roasted me. I didn't have to touch the flames; the radiant heat was more than enough. (Believe me, you learn that quickly if you spend enough time in the kitchen.)

"Shinichi-sama... Mother..."

I looked up. How far had I fallen? I couldn't judge from here. That was partly because of the wind blowing around me, but also the heat; everything looked wavy and it made distances hard to estimate. I looked around, but I encountered largely the same problem. No matter where I turned, the scene had the unsteady quality of a mirage, and I couldn't really tell where I was. I had to assume it was somewhere close to the lowest level of the Dragon's Den.

“I wonder... is everyone okay?” Shinichi-sama appeared to have contained the explosion of the imarufe bisurupeguze, thankfully, and nothing seemed to be coming down after me, so I thought the battle now above my head must be over. The way Shinichi-sama and Minori-sama had looked the last time I saw them, they had seemed perfectly capable of winning the fight by themselves.

I thought about calling out to those above me, but I doubted my voice would make it past the magical winds; I couldn't hear anything that was being said overhead. My ears were completely full of the roar of the wind around me. I couldn't afford to end the spell, so conversation was out of the question.

“Shinichi-sama...” I looked up once more, but everything still quavered, and I couldn't make out much of anything. In fact, it threatened to make me sick to my stomach.

No, wait. The ill feeling I was having...

I could feel my whole body covered in sweat. That was actually a good sign. When one has been exposed to too much heat for too long, ultimately one ceases even to sweat, and then death by desiccation isn't far off.

How long did I have left? I wasn't eager to try to walk when my vision seemed so unsteady, but I had to do *something* to get away from here. Maybe I could find some way to get back upstairs. The moment I tried to take my first step, however, the entire world seemed to tilt crazily, and I collapsed to my hands and knees. No, no, that explained it. It wasn't the world that had tilted. It was me. My brain was still functioning enough to understand that.

I don't know if I can do this... I thought, my consciousness starting to fade. I would still be able to manage my magic for a little bit longer, I thought, but I had to be conscious for that, and I wasn't sure when that was going to fail me. It made perfect sense, really. The wind magic could reduce the amount of heat that got to me, but it was a reduction. Not a complete elimination. And meanwhile, the temperature was slowly climbing.

Hot. So hot. I was sweating from every pore, and I felt awful. Those thoughts, that feeling, seemed to have completely taken over my brain.

“Shin...i...chi...sa...ma...” His name escaped me in a whisper. Would I ever see him again? Would I ever talk to him again?

Oh...

I just wanted to hear his voice one more time.

I wanted to see his face one more time.

I wanted to touch his hand... one more...

"It's delicious, Myusel."

Shinichi-sama complimenting my cooking with a big smile.

"Let's take a picture together!"

Yes... That's what he'd said, even though we'd only just met...

"Myusel."

Shinichi-sama saying my name with that smile on his face.

"Myusel."

Shinichi-sama, his eyes cast shyly to the ground.

"Myusel."

Shinichi-sama...

"Myusel."

"Myusel."

I... What? What was I—?

Shinichi-sama. It was all... Shinichi-sama.

Memories of him, overflowing in my mind.

Everything that had happened. Some of it seemed so long ago.

I'd met him first, but thanks to him, I'd met so many others. Like Her Majesty. Like Minori-sama. Matoba-sama. Elvia-san. Hikaru-sama. Amatenas-san. Clara-san. Even... Falmelle-san... my mother.

It had all been so much... fun. I was so happy.

So, now, it was okay if I.....

"Myusel!"

Shinichi-sama was shouting.

He sounded so panicked for some reason.

When was that? When had that happened?

I couldn't seem to remember...

"Myusel! Myusel! Hold on! I'm going to get you into the forbidden armor now! But you have to deactivate your magic the instant I do!"

Shinichi-sama.

Shinichi...

"Shinichi-sama?!"

My mind, which had been growing dimmer and dimmer, miraculously snapped back to reality. Shinichi-sama's shout, that was what had done it.

"Myusel!"

He was the first thing I saw as I came to. But he wasn't alone. Elvia-san was with him. Both were wearing the forbidden armor that had caused such an uproar at our mansion.

All I could think was: *Oh. He made it. He was in time.*

“Myusel! Myusel, can you hear me?!”

“Y-Yes, sir... Shinichi-sama, I... I can hear... you...” I shook my head and tried to focus my thoughts. It was all right now; Shinichi-sama was here. So long as he was with me, I had nothing to fear. He would figure this out, somehow. He always did. So I...

“All right, Myusel! I’m going to count to three, then I’m going to put the armor on you!”

“Yes, sir!”

“Three, two, one—now!”

I ended my spell. The wind around me briefly vanished, replaced by a scorching heat that threatened to burn my skin. I hardly felt heat; I just felt pain. I screamed. But then...

“Protection of wearer, confirmed. Analyzing environment. Activating cooling subroutine.”

It was the same voice I had heard the last time I put on the forbidden armor. Cold air rushed around me and the pain faded. I forced out several long breaths, hoping to expel the rest of the heat inside me. Then Shinichi-sama was embracing me, armor and all. “Myusel, are you okay? Myusel?” He looked terrified.

“Yes, sir. I can’t believe it, but... I’m okay.”

“Thank god!” Shinichi-sama held my shoulders and let out the deepest breath I had ever seen.

“That’s terrific!” Elvia-san said from behind him, openly joyful.

“Yes, that’s wonderful,” said someone else, who appeared from behind Elvia-san.

“Wha?”

Whoever it was, they were on fire. Literally; their body was covered in flames. To my amazement, the person wore no armor and protected themselves with no wind magic, but simply stood there as their body was consumed by the heat.

“Theresa-san?!” It was the doll-woman who claimed to be the rightful overseer of the Dragon’s Den. “Y-You’re on fire!”

“I wouldn’t worry about it. It’s just an avatar, after all,” she said as if it really didn’t mean anything to her. Burning the whole time.

She slapped at a few stray flames, the way you might brush dust off your clothes, but she quickly began to smoke again and the avatar was soon burning once more. She could try to put them out all day, and they would keep coming back.

“I can change avatars like you can change clothes. My meatsack’s long gone, anyway. Don’t expect this avatar’ll last long now. I’ll take you guys as far as I can, but when this body craps out, you’ll have to do the rest on your own.”

The rest? As I registered the words, I remembered. Shinichi-sama wasn’t here just to rescue me. He had needed the forbidden armor to get close to the “react-torr,” the thing that had once powered the Dragon’s Den and now threatened to destroy us all. Shinichi-sama had to shut it down.

“Sorry about this,” Shinichi-sama said to me. “I’d really like to take you upstairs and let you get some rest first, but—”

I shook my head. “It’s all right. Let me go with you.” I might not be much help, but then again, if I wasn’t there, I would be no help at all. If there was anything I could do to enable Shinichi-sama to complete his mission, I would do it.

“Okay. In that case, Myusel, Elvia, let’s go. Theresa-san, whenever you’re ready.”

“Attaboy,” Theresa-san said, and then she marched into the raging heat. In a few places, her hair was already igniting.



The lowest level of the Dragon’s Den, the home of the rampaging Annihilation Reactor, turned out to be two levels down from where Myusel had fallen.

“Urgh,” I groaned. I know it probably sounded silly, but I couldn’t stop myself. We were walking down a slope through a place of terrifying, hellish heat. In fact, “hellish” didn’t seem like a strong enough word to describe the

temperature.

The forbidden armor—or the PDWS, I guess—adjusted the image on the invisible force field in front of me so there was a minimum of visual distortion from the heat, but that only left us with the awful scene down there on the lowest level. Anything made of plastic or resin had either melted or caught fire, so you couldn't tell what used to be scientific equipment. There were a bunch of holes in the wall, revealing a structure of what I thought was metal pieces. There was rubble from pillars and such that showed signs of having been scorched by fire—but when I thought about it, it was really present tense; the whole place was actively burning.

The metal was so hot it was glowing, and in places it looked like it might start to melt at any moment. I could see that if I was foolish enough to remove my forbidden armor here, I would go up like a torch on the spot. I was curious exactly what the temperature was down there, but I was too scared to ask the AI on the PDWS to check. I was given to understand that 451°F—that's 233°C—was the temperature at which books burned. I figured we were way past that point.

There was actually this old sci-fi novel called *Fahrenheit 451* about a future society where they burned books. It had been turned into a movie, paid homage by another film called *Equilibrium*, and even became a light novel at one point, so the number at least stuck in my head.

.....Er, okay. I admit it: I'm just trying to escape reality now.

The point is, I was very, very frightened by that bottom level.

"Sorry..." Theresa said. "I think this is about it for me." For a while now she had been in actual flames, and at this point she simply sat down on the ground. Frankly, I was amazed she had managed to function as well as she had for as long as she had. She didn't show any sign of experiencing pain from it, but I have to admit, it was tough watching her burn and melt right in front of my eyes. The technology around here made her avatar almost indistinguishable from a flesh-and-blood human, so it was like watching someone sustain horrific burns. If the damage had revealed wires or motors or something, anything that made her look like a robot, a machine, it would have reminded me that she was

basically a living doll, and maybe it all would have seemed less grotesque.

“You’re going to have to go ahead on your own. Just keep going straight, nice and easy.”

“Sure, we can do that, but, uh, are you going to be okay?” I guess she had said something about her consciousness escaping into the network with her personality data when her current body was destroyed. But was the network even active right now? “I mean, didn’t you say the network might not be accessible on the lowest level?”

“Damn... Remembered that, huh?” Theresa grimaced. Or at least, I think that’s what she was trying to do, but her face was so ruined at this point that all she really managed was a twitching at the corners of her mouth. This was definitely bad. She couldn’t even smile anymore. But she said: “This body was never anything more than an avatar. A container for someone who was physically dead a long time ago. I’m like a ghost. So don’t worry about it.”

“Hey, what the heck is that supposed to mean?!” I rushed over to Theresa and knelt beside her. “*“Don’t worry about me—just go’?* That’s, like, a guaranteed death flag, isn’t it?!”

“Don’t know what a ‘death flag’ is, kid. But seriously, just go.”

“I can’t do that!”

Okay, so maybe the “real” Theresa was already dead, and whatever was with me here was just some sort of mechanical copy of her personality. But she still *looked* like a real, living person, and it was more than I could do to simply say, “Okay then, see ya.” I don’t care if you’re a demi-human or a robot or what. If you look human, then in my opinion, you’re human. That’s the power of an otaku who can get moe even for a robot-girl heroine, and don’t you forget it!

Okay, not really the point right now.

“Shinichi-sama’s right,” Elvia said, crouching in front of Theresa. “I dunno what exactly’s going on, but ya can’t just give up! You’re just like Hikaru-sama, right? So you must be human!”

“Er, Elvia...”

Her logic seemed to be that because Theresa was using an avatar just like Hikaru-san, she must be human. I don't think she understood that in this case, the consciousness or personality could exist completely separate from a human body that was long dead. I didn't blame her; cyberpunk and sci-fi stuff where the plots relied on networks and that kind of technology would be difficult to grasp if you weren't used to them.

"Elvia, take Theresa-san upstairs," I said, touching her shoulder (or more accurately, the shoulder of her forbidden armor).

"Wha?" she said.

"There should still be time, if you go right now. Once you get a few floors up, the network should be active—the point is, you might be able to save her!"

"R-Right, I'm on it!" She nodded a couple of times, then grabbed Theresa in the big, bulky arms of the forbidden armor and set off running. "Shinichi-sama, Myusel, be careful!" she called back to us.

Aw, man... Look where you're going! The heat haze was getting so severe that the image improvement routine couldn't always keep up with it, making it hard to be sure where we were putting our feet. We might be looking straight ahead and still fall down.

"We will! Eyes forward when you're running!" I shouted back.

"Yessir!" Elvia said, and then she and Theresa vanished up the long tunnel.

At last I turned to Myusel. "I'm sorry, Myusel. I should have taken this moment to get you out of here, too."

"No, sir, Shinichi-sama. I'm going to help you," she said firmly. "It looks like I can still use my magic."

"Huh? Oh yeah..." Now that she mentioned it, I realized it was true. I hadn't noticed because of the way everything looked through the PDWS's display, but Myusel was still using her wind magic to help deflect the heat from me ever so slightly. Wow. So the nanomachines were still working, even under these circumstances. They must be tougher than I thought. In fact, come to think of it, I remembered reading somewhere—maybe in one of my dad's research books or something—that the ideal power source for nanomachines, especially

medical ones, at the current state of the art was infrared. Parts of the human body naturally emit infrared radiation. It's already there inside us. It's a minimal amount of energy, of course, but it's more than enough to power something as small as a nanomachine. If the magical sprites in this world—which was to say, the nanomachines—also used infrared radiation as power, then maybe they would function even better than normal in a high-heat situation like this.

Unfortunately, with the connection to the network broken, I couldn't just bust out with whatever magic I could imagine, but maybe we could still use our normal spells.

"Don't know how long it'll last, though. Let's hurry."

"Right!"

We took off running. I'd been a little freaked out to watch Elvia run earlier, but when I was doing it myself, I realized the forbidden armor was very comfortable to move in, automatically correcting for any bad footing—I guess it was designed for battlefield use, after all.

"I know it's a little late to be saying this, but this armor is truly amazing," Myusel said.

"I agree. Heck, if all it did was keep the heat off us, that would be awesome enough."

We were very lucky whoever had built the PDWS had thought it through enough not to make the whole thing out of metal. That might have made us feel like we were in literal walking tanks, but it also would have fried us in a few seconds flat down here. What a nasty way to go.

Come to think of it, there was that thing—the brazen bull; is that what it was called? It was said to be a metal statue in the shape of a bull. It was hollow, and a person would be locked inside of it and a fire lit under it, so they roasted to death. I thought it was supposed to have been invented in ancient Greece or Rome or something...

No! No time now for discursive excurses on bovine statuary!

Suddenly I saw Myusel smile slightly behind the transparent force field protecting her. "I... I really thought I was done for back there, until you came to

rescue me, Shinichi-sama.”

“Oh, uh... Yeah?”

“For some reason, I was flooded with memories of you. Of our earliest moments together...”

“Yikes! They say your life flashes before your eyes when you’re about to go...”

In other words, it had been a very, very close call.

“Really? What do they mean by that?”

“I guess when a person is dying, scenes from their life supposedly go through their mind really fast. So it would be... I mean, better if you didn’t see that stuff.”

“Oh... But...” She giggled. “I remembered so many things we did together. Like when we went to Ja-pan.”

“Oh, yeah. I remember hitting Akiba.”

“Shinichi-sama.” Myusel’s smile widened, and she said, with a touch of sweetness, “When this is over, I want to go to Ja-pan again.”

“No, stop!” I exclaimed. I couldn’t believe I was hearing this. “You can’t do that, Myusel!”

“Wha? Oh, I—I’m sorry... I forgot my place...” She lowered her eyes, downright frightened.

Enunciating very clearly for emphasis, I said: “You *must not* say anything like, ‘When this is over, I want to go to Ja-pan again.’” I clenched my fist—or rather, clanked the PDWS’s claw fingers together. “That’s a guaranteed death flag!”

“Wha...?”

“Any character who says something like that, you *know* they’re going to bite the dust! It’s a law of nature! More dangerous than seeing your life flash before your eyes!”

“I’m sorry? Er... Oh...” She blinked rapidly.

Okay, so it wasn’t exactly like I believed Myusel was really tripping a death flag and was going to get killed. But she was such a quick study... And if I may

say so, I was a little worried that if worst came to worst, she might not fight all the way to the bitter end, but just say something like, “If I must die, Shinichi-sama, as long as it’s with you...”

“In any case, we just need to focus on stopping that reactor!” I said.

“Y-Yes, sir!” Myusel was smiling again as she nodded, and then the two of us headed deeper into the Dragon’s Den.



The “hyperspace tunnel.” That was the mysterious thing that connected our Holy Eldant Empire to Ja-pan, which was somehow both far away and very close at the same time. Nobody knew when or how this connection had been established. Not the wizards of our country, nor the scientists of Ja-pan. While it was, in effect, the border between our land and theirs, it was also a unique connection between two countries. No other portal like it existed anywhere, so far as we knew. Nor had we heard of anything similar in any other nation in the vicinity.

Hence we made it our business to be quite careful with this mysterious hole and to protect it by all means at our disposal. When we discovered that magic from our world was being sucked away through the portal to Ja-pan, we had a large “lid” constructed and placed over the hole to stop it. We certainly did not wish for the tunnel, which had been the source of so much abundance and so much cultural enrichment for us, to be the source of any trouble. Thus it was opened only when absolutely necessary for transit, while at all other times the lid prevented anyone or anything, including sprites, from passing through it.

The hole had once opened onto a simple grass field, but now there were military barracks there, along with a tower and a wheel to move the great chains that opened and closed the lid, and a number of other structures. At first glance, it could look like a building site, and to prevent any other nation from getting the idea of taking it over, it was constantly garrisoned by nearly a hundred troops, including many who could use magic.

That was not even including the Jay Ess Dee Eff troops from Ja-pan, who lived and worked alongside our own soldiers. Therefore, when we arrived at the

hyperspace tunnel and observed a Ja-panese military vehicle parked there, we were not surprised. We admit, however, that we did not expect Matoba to emerge from it.

“Your Majesty.” As the chief Ja-panese diplomat here, this man routinely went back and forth between our empire and Ja-pan, but the terminus of the hyperspace tunnel was nothing more than a stopping-off point for him. It was unusual for him to spend any significant time here. In our experience he was more typically to be found either at the Jay Ess Dee Eff barracks established near the practice grounds, or else at Shinichi’s—that is to say, Amutech’s—mansion.

“Matoba. What brings you here?” We tried to look neutral as we spoke. This man was not an enemy as such, but there remained some doubt as to whether he was truly trustworthy. He was the type who could hide a trick up his sleeve, or a plot behind his smile. So we always attempted to play things close to the proverbial vest when speaking to him.

It wasn’t entirely a façade, however: although Zahar had briefed us on the general state of the hyperspace tunnel on the carriage ride over, we didn’t know many details.

“Apparently there’s some sort of anomaly with the hyperspace tunnel,” he said.

We glanced at Zahar for a second before we responded, “Did one of the guards tell you that?”

Matoba shook his head. “Our people have confirmed it as well. Some of the elevator machinery is malfunctioning, and a crack has appeared in the ground near the tunnel, according to reports. We can assume that much is a consequence of the earthquake...” Here Matoba frowned, a most unusual expression from the normally taciturn man. “But it seems the elevator wires have gone slack.”

“Yes, so it does.” We had heard much the same from Zahar.

A slackening of the wires. That wasn’t inherently dangerous; it wasn’t even necessarily a bad sign. They need simply be wound up again. The real question was *why* the wires had gone slack.

“I think it would be quickest if you observed the situation yourself, Your Majesty,” Matoba said.

“That is what we are here for. Zahar.”

“Majesty.” He nodded smartly, and the soldiers around the area got to work slowly pulling on the chains that opened the lid on the tunnel. They must have been advised that this would be expected when we arrived.

“Observe, Your Majesty,” Zahar said. We walked toward the wooden fence that had been set up around the tunnel. We leaned on it and peered over...

“What is this?!” we said, unable to hide our shock.



We had seen this hyperspace tunnel more than once before, and had even passed through it ourselves on one occasion to reach Ja-pan. Some brave souls had descended directly into the tunnel in order to study it, and they reported that it was of long, narrow construction, constricting somewhat in the middle. In other words, the shape was roughly that of an hourglass. Thus when we leaned over the side of the railing, we could see a dark space with a tiny white dot deep within. Or at least, that's what we should have seen. It was what we had always seen before. But not this time.

The tunnel had expanded. Had the constriction in the center opened out? Or had both ends come closer together? Whatever the case, it was no longer a white dot that we saw within the tunnel, but a clear image of the scene on the Ja-panese side. Their end of the hole was covered by a roof, so that instead of the sky, a gray, warehouse-like ceiling was visible.

"What is going on here?!" we said.

"In the opinion of our physicists," Matoba said slowly, "the hole was originally opened by some kind of massive energy burst. The fact that it's expanding raises the possibility that the energy is increasing."

We said nothing.

"We've measured the distance, and it has grown perceptibly smaller. At this rate, we project that within a month or so, the two ends of the hole will collide."

"That seems like it would make transit far easier. Is that not a good thing?"

"To the extent that it's impossible to say what might happen when the collision occurs, we don't know." Matoba produced a handkerchief from his bag and began wiping away sweat. "If our two worlds were themselves to collide..."

We were silent once again. We exchanged looks with Zahar. Country and country—nay, world and world could collide. It was true indeed that it was impossible to speculate what might happen. It was bad enough when two ships ran into each other, but two entire worlds?

"According to our measurements, the tunnel isn't shrinking consistently. It's unstable; the size fluctuates. There's always a possibility it might return to its

former state if left to its own devices. However..." At this point Matoba stopped talking, studying us and Zahar. He seemed to be hesitating over something. We attempted to encourage him with a nod. "We believe," he finally continued, "that the safest course of action would be to seal off this tunnel entirely."

"What?" But that would mean...

Matoba didn't continue, but only wiped away more sweat. We, though, were already looking away from him, back into the hyperspace tunnel. It was true: the scenery on the other side of the tunnel seemed to waver, as if it was unsteady. The strange hole connecting our two worlds shook and trembled. It was enough to give one pause.

"Matoba, it can't be possible that Ja-pan..."

"I'm afraid, Your Majesty, that it is." Then Matoba gave a very, very long sigh.



It was... weirder than I expected.

A reactor that used matter annihilation. Colliding matter and antimatter to produce huge amounts of energy—as far as I knew, theoretically the most efficient power source imaginable.

I guess I'd sort of pictured it looking like a nuclear reactor. You know, a big, metal cylinder with lots of pipes coming out of it. And I wasn't wrong about that. The cylinder was there, and the pipes, too. But there was more.

"What's this?"

Around the canister were five ring-like things, continuously rotating. I judged them to be a good ten meters in diameter. They were each rotating in opposite directions, like they were sealing something in...

"An Annihilation Reactor... and magnetic field rings?!" I said suddenly, the words tumbling out.

Obviously, I wasn't a scientist or a scholar or anything. Frankly, the best we could do would be to call otakuism part of the humanities. But I'd seen enough sci-fi stuff to have an idea what this was. Matter and antimatter, as I recalled, began to react the moment they came into contact with each other, with most

of the material transforming into energy. Get enough of it in one place and pressurize it, and it begins to split. We're way beyond nuclear fission, here. This is just by letting matter and antimatter get a sniff of each other.

That's why antimatter is so difficult to handle in a world that's completely made up of, well, matter. If you put it in a containment vessel, it'll interact with the matter of the vessel and explode. So instead you have to put the reactive material in a vacuum container, and keep it stored in a vacuum. The magnetic field is how they do that. They use the magnets to fix the antimatter in place, keeping it stable.

Those rotating rings were probably creating complicated magnetic fields to keep the matter and antimatter from coming into contact. It's sort of like the primer bulb or injection pipe on a gasoline engine, except with a force field that controls the flow of matter and antimatter.

"And they want us to stop that thing?"

No... We couldn't just turn it off. If those magnetic rings stopped functioning, the stuff in the reactor would be pulled down by gravity and end up coming into contact with matter. Then the reactor wouldn't be going rogue anymore—because it would all be over in one instantaneous explosion.

What was the story here?! This was, like, Super Nightmare Hell Difficulty!

Okay, slow down. Theresa said there should be an emergency shut-off. We should be able to use that to stabilize the vacuum inside the reactor without turning off the magnetic rings—or so I hoped. She'd said the controls would be on the wall to the right as you came in.

I looked over... and froze. Someone was there. No. *Something*. Indistinct figures advancing toward us. Wait—figures?! Here?!

"Shinichi-sama, look..."

Maybe the PDWS's AI could detect me straining my eyes, because it increased the zoom on the 3D image directly in front of me. Suddenly, the silhouettes became clear.

"They can't be zombies... can they? But what are they?!"

They looked human enough, but they clearly weren't. Or maybe they used to be. Or maybe they had been avatars, like Theresa's or Hikaru-san's. The details were different, but they had the same shimmering pieces of light in their chests.

Dolls. Probably put here to oversee the facility, just like Theresa...

"What are those?" I said. The PDWS started narrating: *"What are those. Request for object identification and information. Search complete. Presumed to be facility administration devices, chassis number MD033M. Gynoids with simple onboard artificial intelligence."*

Simple artificial intelligence? Did that mean...

"There's nobody in there?"

"Affirmative. No biological components present. No artificial or composite humanoid personality present."

I didn't say anything for a moment. In other words, they were maintenance robots. No smarts to speak of. You wouldn't need that to do repetitive maintenance and upkeep tasks. If anything came up that demanded real judgment, I assumed it would have been left to someone "authorized" like Theresa. The humanoid shape was probably just because that was the most convenient thing when working in a facility used and run by humans. It would make all the hallways and staircases accessible and so on.

"Still... It's kind of unsettling..."

It was like Theresa earlier, but worse. The bots' faces, arms, legs, and bodies were all in various stages of melting. From the heat down here, I assumed. The stuff made of softer material, to mimic biological human bits—in other words the skin and the muscle underneath—weren't built to stand up to these sorts of temperatures. In places, the robots were so badly melted that they were half skeleton. And then...

"Warning," the PDWS intoned. *"All MD033M units currently in security mode. No IFF response. Probability you have been judged an intruder: high."*

"Uh?"

IFF—I recognized that from my anime and novels, too. It stood for

“identification friend or foe,” and was a radio signal used to distinguish friendly and enemy units. Hey... Wait a second! So that meant the bots’ IFF detectors were on the fritz, and they thought we were enemies?! And did this thing say security mode?! If those droids were supposed to be protecting this facility, then naturally...

“Shinichi-sama?!” Myusel cried.

The robots, which had been wandering around zombie-like until that moment, all turned and looked at us at once. Their eyes, an eerie blue that stood out all the more starkly in this burning hellscape, blinked in unison.

“Oh, *shit!*” I yelped, and at that exact moment all of the dolls lurched toward us, arms outstretched. It was exactly like something out of a zombie movie. I mean, I didn’t think they were coming to shake our hands. It was all too easy to see what was going on... and it was creepy as heck. The dolls closed in on us. There were too many to count. I thought there had to be at least fifty of them.

“They think we’re enemies!” I said.

“C-Can’t you tell them we’re not?!” Myusel said. She was so sweet. And I appreciated that she understood that was the sort of thing I would think of. If they had been avatars like Theresa’s, receptacles for human consciousness, I might even have tried it.

But instead I said, “There’s no way!” With their IFF sensors broken, there wasn’t going to be any reasoning with the simplistic onboard AIs. And even if we could have managed it, I didn’t think we had the time. These things were supposed to be taking care of the reactor, and they were already melting piles of parts. Who knew when that thing was going to blow?

“They’re just broken dolls! Let’s blow them away and get through!”

“*Tifu Murottsu!*” Myusel and I both exclaimed, hitting them with our magic. Either the dolls were never designed for combat duty, or they were just that badly impaired by the damage they’d already sustained, because it wasn’t hard to fling back the ones at the front. And that was great and all, but then...

“Wha?!” I cried. As the robots flew backwards, they grabbed onto a pipe. And either they were hitting really hard, or the pipe had been weakened by the

heat, too, because it broke right off and started spewing hot steam.

“Not good, not good!”

“Shinichi-sama?”

“Myusel, we can’t rely on projectiles or anything flying around. It might destroy this entire facility!” I said, not taking my eyes off of our enemies. We could handle one broken pipe, I guessed. But if we broke those magnetic rings, or the control mechanisms for them, that would probably be it for us. “Let’s just forget about these guys for now—we have to get over there!” I pointed to the control panel Theresa had told us about.

“Yes, sir! B-But...”

“If they come at you, use your fists!”

I figured that wouldn’t do too much harm to anything. Thankfully, equipped with the strength-boosting PDWS suits as we were, I had a feeling we could get in a wrestling match with a gorilla or a black bear and have a decent chance. “If you have to use magic, only use it defensively, like you did earlier! And no beam weapons, either!”

“Yes, sir!”

After that, it all started to become a blur. Myusel and I pushed our way through the crowd of dolls, lashing out with the suits’ arms to drive them back. The PDWS’s inherent defensive capabilities, combined with Myusel’s wind-magic shield, kept the bots from getting close, and we worked our way arduously toward the control panel.

In some sense, I was glad the maintenance units were out of control. They might not be quite as strong or as smart as Theresa, but if they had retained some measure of autonomous judgment, they might have figured out what we were after and done something to the control panel before we could get there—and that would have been the end for us. But they were in no state to have complicated thoughts like that, so they just attacked us.

“Huff... Puff...”

In less than five minutes, though, we’d started to breathe dangerously hard.

Obviously, the PDWS suits did a perfect job of helping us do what we wanted to do, but they couldn't stop all the heat from getting to us, and the temperature in the cockpits was climbing. Without Myusel's wind magic, it would have been even worse. Maybe we would have collapsed by now. I had to get to the control panel as soon as possible. The dolls kept getting back up, but we kept pushing them back down and forged ahead.

"Shinichi-sama...!" Myusel's voice sounded choked. With all the heat and the constant use of magic, she was probably exhausted. "Oh!" Her leg collapsed and she fell to the ground. The bots were on her immediately.

"Myusel!"

"It's... It's all right... You have to go on!" She was actually grabbing the robots with the PDWS's arms, not letting them go.

"But... Myusel...!" I swallowed heavily.

She managed to smile, though, and said, "Um, I think... I think this is where I say, 'Leave this to me! You go on ahead!'"

I shook like a shock of electricity had run through me. Of course! Yes—this was the moment, that most famous of situations! Those words every guy—in fact, probably every girl, too—ranked high on the list of things they wanted to say once in their lives! Okay, so sometimes it was also a death flag! But I couldn't believe Myusel had stolen a march on me when it came to famous expressions!

Right, right, even I knew I didn't have the time for this sort of internal monologue anymore.

"A-All right. Sorry—I'll let you handle this!" I could barely bring myself to do it, but I left Myusel and pressed forward.

We were out of time.

Just about five meters to the control panel. Beyond the squirming mass of dolls, I could see a lever surrounded by a yellow-and-black striped pattern as if to say, *Emergency controls, right here!* Maybe there'd been a cover over it once, but it had melted away, and the lever was sitting right out there.

Suddenly, though, I came to a halt, my path blocked. It was the dolls, yes, but they were acting different. Five or six of them had gotten together and were hugging each other. It was... weird. Like they had been trying to make a wall but had ended up with a rugby scrum.

“Wait... Are they... m-merging?!”

They wound up with one leg and one arm each. A single torso. But where they had bent together, a single head emerged. They had turned themselves into a giant nearly five meters tall—even if it did have a lot of weird bits sticking out. It was grotesque, with half-subsumed parts protruding here and there. I couldn’t even tell if it was more mech or more bio-monster.

Okay, not the main problem...

“Is that even possible?!” This wasn’t one of those old robot anime! All right, so I admit, having the shrimp minions combine into a massive last boss was pretty classic, but still! It wasn’t fair! But none of this arguing (or whatever) on my part was going to get me anywhere. “What the heck do I do about it?!”

As I stood there in shock, two crab-like claws—or really, robot arms that had been appropriated as claws—came at me. Robots wriggled on it like fingers, like a bunch of insects. It was really profoundly creepy.

I tried to counter with the PDWS’s arm. But I gasped as my arm didn’t stop the giant’s hand. Instead, the finger-like things broke apart, sucking me downward. I found myself leaning forward, and the robots were collectively about to headbutt me... Er, I mean, the giant was hitting me with its fist.

I was slammed to the ground as if I’d been hit with a huge metal hammer. “Urgugh!” I blurted. Weird sound, I know. The PDWS’s force field shielded me, of course. Otherwise, my face would have been in a million pieces on the ground and that would have been the end. But the force field couldn’t completely neutralize the impact, or my acceleration.

“Gurguh!” I exclaimed next. Another weird sound. It was because the giant had stepped on my back. Of course, my body wasn’t (etc. etc.).

“How come it gets to be this smart when its IFF sensor isn’t even working? That’s not fair!” I whined. It wasn’t like I expected the giant to go, “That’s a

good point.” Then again, maybe it wasn’t the case that the maintenance bots had figured out how to do this giantizing thing on the spot. Maybe it had been in their programming all along. It was probably pretty helpful for doing jobs that a human-sized robot couldn’t do, or lifting heavy objects. Great innovation.

But anyway...

“Hrgh...” The giant lifted its foot, preparing to stomp on me again. I took the momentary opportunity to half-roll away, jumping to my feet before the giant could react.

“Okay. I see how this works.” I was privately shouting at myself to keep my brain working, my thoughts threatening to slip away in a haze of heat.

Here was the reality: I didn’t think I could beat this thing with brute force. But my opponent was so big that its movements were slow, exaggerated, every gesture larger than life. With all that weight, it probably didn’t balance very well. It couldn’t move too fast or it would fall clean over. More evidence that it was originally designed for work, not combat.

Well!

“Classic problem, classic solution!” I started to run. Straight toward the giant. The robot raised its fist, ready to hit me again, but he wasn’t fast enough. “Yaaaahhh!” I was sliding. There was no nice, obvious *shoom!* sound, but the PDWS slipped right between the robot’s legs. Perfect!

Again, this was the way every character in anime dealt with a big, lumbering opponent. Making yourself gigantic might make you look powerful, but there was a big question mark over whether it was actually more effective. Think back to the Second World War, when a fixation on bigger and bigger battleships with bigger and bigger guns ultimately produced the battleship *Yamato*. But she was sunk by a group of Allied aircraft, proving that with resources and maneuverability, a group of smaller enemies could take down a single larger foe.

A giant has a lot of blind spots and a lot of openings. Especially a humanoid one.

The moment I made it past the robot, I half-spun and hit the deck. As I’d

expected, the giant was twisted around, trying to follow me. Since it was made from a bunch of dolls, it could twist itself unnaturally far around. Its punch was simply following me. But then:

“Cable!” The PDWS’s AI read my mind, launching the steel claw at the end of my arm. It was attached to a cable; in other words, it was effectively an anchor. And it ran straight into the left leg of the unbalanced giant. The claw bit deep. The robot lost its footing and stopped.

“All *right!*” I jumped up and started running. “*When youuu reaaach for your dreaaaam,*” I chanted melodically, tugging hard, “*onnnlyy triaaals awaaaiit!*”

The cable wrapped around the giant’s leg went taut, pulling the leg into the air. For an instant the thing looked like it had slipped on a banana peel—before it came crashing down.

“That’s the *only* way to deal with giant, walking opponents!”

If it was good enough for the Empire’s A*-*Ts in *Star W**s*, it was good enough for me—even if they’d had four legs. Big and heavy might give better handling on uneven terrain, but it also made it that much easier to knock them down.

Anyway, back to business!

“Awesome!” Once I was sure the giant was down for the count, I retracted my arm wire. I turned toward the control panel and resumed moving. I could see the floor twisted by the heat in places, preventing me from running and forcing me to proceed at a delicate walk.

Four more meters.

Three more.

Two.

Aaand...

“Right, this should do it!”

I reached out with the PDWS’s arm and grabbed—

Thunk. Suddenly I, or rather the PDWS, keeled over. I looked back to see one

of the maintenance robots clinging to the left leg of my suit. Its legs were broken, and it couldn't walk. It must have followed me at a crawl. I assumed it had come from somewhere inside the giant, which must have broken itself back into its individual pieces.

"You little...!"

I tried to kick the thing away, but I was off balance and didn't do a very good job. In fact, I fell flat on my face. Not good. At this rate, other bots would start to catch me.

"Heeek!"

The robot was looking at me through the suit's transparent force field, its face half melted, a metal skeleton visible underneath. It looked less like a zombie and more like the Termini**tor.

"Crap, get out of here! Let go of me—I don't have time to play *Termina**r* with you! I swear I'll throw you right into that reactor!" I shouted, but none of it intimidated the doll.

I couldn't have been more than thirty centimeters away, but I just couldn't reach.

"Damn it all to helllllll!" I gave a shout that was very unlike me, then reached behind myself to grab the robot off the back of my suit. I held it up by the neck. "Yaaaarrrrhhhh!"

Clasped in my mechanical hand, the robot snapped in half almost immediately with an audible *crack*. It felt a bit like being in a splatter movie, but I was in no mood to get all upset about it. I figured I could finally get on my way now—but the instant I thought that, I felt two more robots attach themselves to my PDWS. Didn't they ever give up?!

But no matter how I shouted or cursed, they refused to let go. And even with the PDWS, I didn't think I was going to last ten or twenty or thirty minutes in this heat. Just thirty more centimeters. If I could only make it thirty centimeters...

"Hang on..." I said, registering the half a doll still dangling from my hand. I reached up with it... "Thanks for the help!"

Using the doll, which was still in the “grab” position, like a reacher device, I was able to reach the lever and flip it.

“An authorized person has requested to activate the manual emergency shutdown,” the PDWS intoned immediately. *“Please confirm: would you like to activate the manual emergency shutdown?”*

I guess this was some sort of final confirmation with the administrator of the facility. So it wasn’t going to turn itself off just because I threw a lever.

“Confirm! I would like that! Anyway, just shut down!” I exclaimed.

“Fixed-temperature Annihilation Reactor, shutting down.” No sooner had I heard the voice than the massive magnetic rings circling over my head came to a halt. *“Entering antimatter stabilization mode.”* The rings began to circle again in a slow drift, with noticeably less urgency than before.

“D-Did I do it?”

I felt the air around the reactor cooling rapidly; I guess it was also venting excess heat. Still, it seemed like it would be a while before anyone could get anywhere near this thing without protection.

I let out a breath I didn’t know I’d been holding. I had somehow managed to keep the reactor from exploding. The other world was safe.

All I had to do now was...

“Get home... Somehow.”

I located Myusel, still thrashing under a pile of maintenance robots, and started forcibly peeling them off her, one by one.

Epilogue

“Ahh...”

I was in the dining area, savoring the tea Myusel had made me this morning as I let out a long, satisfied breath.

It had been two days since the events in the Dragon’s Den, and we were safely back in Eldant.

“There really is no place like home—and no drink like Myusel’s tea at home!”

“Thank you, sir,” Myusel said with a smile. Breakfast was on the table, and Myusel, Elvia, Hikaru-san, and Brooke’s entire family were already seated. A perfectly normal morning. Ahh. Perfect. A completely, totally quiet and undisturbed start to the day—how terrific!

“I wasn’t sure we were going to make it back this time,” Minori-san said with a wry smile.

If you were curious, by the time Myusel and I had finally grabbed, smashed, and bashed our way through the zombies or e*doskeletons or whatever they were and made our way back to the first floor of the Dragon’s Den, we discovered the scuffle between the Bahairamanian Eastern Second Unit and Garius and his reinforcements was already over.

It was thanks to Theresa.

She’d left her battered, melted avatar to work on repairing itself and transferred her consciousness to a spare avatar, after which she appeared to the combatants and said, “I’m shutting this facility down and sealing it off.”

After they were informed that all of this trouble—the ruination of the Third Capital, the earthquakes, all of it—was due to Bahairam’s Undertakers fiddling around with a facility they didn’t really understand, there wasn’t much they could say. Not the Undertakers themselves, and certainly not the Eastern Second Unit, which was still reeling from their beating at Minori-san’s and my hands.

Since I had shut down the reactor, the facility wouldn't be producing anymore BOUs, anyway. Without the ability to manufacture dragons, the place was suddenly a lot less valuable to Bahairam. And when Garius added that even the earthquake in Eldant had been caused by whatever was lying underneath this building, the Bahairamanians seemed to lose the last of their interest in having anything to do with the place.

Theresa finally chased us out of the Den, after which she collected the last of the nekkids and the dragons, sealed the entrance to the facility as well as the tunnel the Eastern Second Unit had emerged from, and announced that she would attack any intruders, without exception. The Third Capital seemed set to become Theresa's personal fiefdom, forbidden even to the people of Bahairam. Having what was effectively a neutral zone like that right near the border would actually be very convenient for the Eldant Empire, so Garius agreed readily and withdrew.

Okay, so on our way out of the capital we had to break through the cordon established by the Eastern Second Unit, and I guess there was a little bit of what you might call fighting—but with the Faldra's power of flight, we broke through pretty easily.

"I've got to say, the last few days have been full of surprises," Hikaru-san said. That was for sure. "I can't believe this 'other' world is actually our own far future..."

"You can say that again..." I said. It still didn't feel quite real to me. All I had to go on was Theresa's explanation, nothing but her words. She could say it, but that didn't mean I believed it in my bones. I mean, sure, there was the PDWS and stuff, all kinds of things that supported the theory. But I still wondered about the nature of this future. Like, maybe it was a parallel world that had split off from ours. Then again, if we were really thousands or tens of thousands of years in the future, we would be so far removed from our own reality that this really could count as a completely different world.

"So that means Shinichi-sama and y'all are actually our ancestors?" Elvia asked. She and Myusel didn't necessarily understand all this "time slip" stuff, but she at least grasped that we were from the nominal past.

“I guess? Even the BOUs—I mean, the demi-humans—they might have been genetically modified, but human DNA is still the basis for them.”

“So Shinichi-sama and Minori-sama, you’re actually a super-duper old guy and lady who’ve been alive for ages?!”

“No, we’re not!”

Yeah. She definitely didn’t understand the time travel thing. It didn’t stop us from having a pleasant, lively breakfast, though, chatting and laughing.

Then someone appeared at the door to the dining area: “Knock knock.”

“Oh, Matoba-san, Satou-san.” Matoba-san was standing there, along with Satou-san, his bodyguard from the JSDF. “We’re right in the middle of breakfast. You guys want some?”

Myusel’s breakfasts—in fact, all the food she made—were delicious, and I never missed a chance to let others experience them. Myusel always made a little extra for breakfast, so we could accommodate a couple more people.

“A very tempting offer, but I must decline,” Matoba-san said. “I don’t believe I have the stomach for it at the moment.”

“Wha...?” That seemed like unusually feeble talk, coming from him. Wait, was he feeling poorly?

“I’ve come with a message for you,” Matoba-san said, and then he produced a handkerchief from his bag and started wiping his forehead.

“A message?”

“I’ve been informed that the Japanese government has made its decision.” He looked around at all of us.

“Decision? About what?”

“Well, I presume official written and video notification will be arriving in the coming days...”

Official notification—in writing and by video? What the heck was going on? What could Matoba-san have to tell us to make him act so stiff?

Finally he said: “Shinichi-kun, Hikaru-kun, allow me to thank you for all the

effort you've put into running Amutech." His brow furrowed slightly.

"Koganuma-kun, we likewise appreciate your fine work as their bodyguard."

"Hold on, what's this all about?"

"We—that is to say, the Japanese government..." Matoba-san stopped for a second, almost hesitant. But then he said: "It is our intention to withdraw from this world. Permanently."

(つづく)

Cont'd

Afterword

Hullo, Sakaki here, bringing you Volume 16 of *Outbreak Company*!

This volume and the previous one form a single story, but life got in the way, and there was a pretty big gap between the publishing of the two volumes. I'm really sorry about that. I know you're not supposed to make people wait to see how a cliffhanger turns out.

If you've been reading along so far, you've probably started to guess that the series is coming to its conclusion... but while working out the exact details of the plot, I realized it was going to be borderline trying to wrap it all up in a single additional volume, so I'm currently refiguring things.

Initially, my plan was to have Volume 17 be the final book. So will it be another Part One/Part Two thing? Will the last volume just be really thick? It's a close call. Sorry again.

As I've mentioned before, I've always known how I wanted to end the story, and the only real question was what twists and turns it would take to get there. Wouldn't you love to see all the characters combine their power at the very end to defeat the last boss in an epic final confrontation? (*Editor's note: There's a last boss?*)

My working method goes like this: I think up the plot and dictate it out loud, whereupon my assistant (and live-in disciple) writes it down, which both helps me work and helps my assistant/disciple learn. While taking down the plot for the final part of this series, my assistant(/disciple) said, "Wow, I can't believe *Outbreak Company* is almost over. It hits you right here, doesn't it?" And I have to admit, I got a little choked up myself.

Think about it: I did the first planning for this series back in 2011. I just glanced at the file on my computer, and I saw the file name was "Sim Akiba

(temp title).”

But then again, it hasn’t even been ten years since then. And in that time, there’s been both an anime and a manga adaptation of the material. It’s been a wild ride.

So with that, the next volume will be the last one—or maybe not; we’ll find out! (He says, as if he wasn’t involved.) To all my readers, I would be thrilled if you’d stick with me to the end.

Sakaki Ichiro

11 Nov 2016

Translator's Notes

Chapter One: They've Got the Whole World In A... Pinch?

Resid Evil... Devil *** Cry... Dark S**ls***

That is, *Resident Evil*, *Devil May Cry*, and *Dark Souls*, all video games with hellish settings.

I'll Give You Half the World

A famous line uttered by the final boss in the first *Dragon Quest* game, in an attempt to get the hero to join him instead of fighting him.

Dancing Half-Naked, etc.

(Spoilers: *Dragon Quest Builders*)

This refers to the game *Dragon Quest Builders*, which turns out to take place in an alternate-history version of the DQ world in which that first hero took the evil villain up on his offer of “half the world.” The villain bestows on the hero a dilapidated castle with a sign that says “Half the World,” and the hero lives there for ages, until by the time of *Builders*, he's bouncing around, barely clothed, an enemy to the player character.

The Hetero Sword

In Japanese, *nonke soodo*. *Nonke* is Japanese gay slang for someone who isn't gay. (The closest English equivalent in meaning is probably “breeder,” but we figured that term might not be familiar enough to some readers.)

Marah and Banco**n Got Pregnant in Patalli****

The reference is to *Patalliro!*, a manga (and later anime) that started running

in 1978 and continues today. Maraich Juschenfe is an assassin enlisted to kill Jack Bancoran, but instead they become lovers, with Maraich becoming pregnant (not once, but twice) despite the fact that both of them are male.

Yaoi Holes

Yaoi ana: a fictional organ (or perhaps, simply a fictional hole) sometimes said to exist in the bodies of male lovers. Although opinions vary on exactly what a “yaoi hole” is, the expression doesn’t necessarily refer to any standard feature of male biology.

Harmagedon

It’s possible this is simply an alternate spelling of the event also known as Armageddon, but it could also be a reference to the feature-film version of a series called *Genma Taisen* (*Genma Wars*), a franchise that began as a manga in 1967. The film, which came out in 1983, was titled *Harmagedon*.

The Demonlord Attacks! Shinichi Takes 99 Damage!

Shinichi describes Minori with the classic term *maou*. This is often translated as “demon king,” but Minori probably wouldn’t be a king. She arguably isn’t a lord, either, but in addition to being a standard trope in light-novel fantasies, *maou* is also a play on *ryuuou*, the name of the final villain in *Dragon Quest*. That name was rendered Dragonlord in English, so we played on that for our translation. The line “Shinichi takes 99 damage!” is likewise an allusion to the battle text in *Dragon Quest*.

Emergency Spray

A health item from *Resident Evil*.

Warrior of Light

This may or may not be an intentional reference to the heroes of the original *Final Fantasy* game, who were known by this title.

Indoorite

Shinichi refers to himself as *indoa-ha*, “[part of] the indoor faction.”

James Camer**

That is, James Cameron, director of films like *Aliens* and *Avatar*.

Chapter Two: When an Armor Meets an Armor Coming Through the Rye

Seiza

This is a formal sitting position in Japan. As Hikaru says, it involves tucking your feet under your behind so you're sitting on your shins. It can get pretty uncomfortable if you're not used to it.

Word Games

In the Japanese, Shinichi actually mentions a specific game, known as *shiritori*. Translating literally (if somewhat unfortunately) as “bottom-grabbing,” *shiritori* is a game where one player says a word, then the next player has to come up with a word that begins with the syllable with which the previous word ended. So for example, the first player might say *kani* (crab), and the second might respond with *niwatori* (chicken). A third player might then say *risu* (squirrel). (In general, only nouns are allowed in this game.) The game ends when a player can't think of a word, or when they say a word ending in the syllable *n*. (Although many words in Japanese start with an “n” sound, such as *ni* or *na*, no word begins with the actual individual syllable *n*.)

Dragons Screwing Cars

An online subculture exists of people who create and consume images of dragons having sex with cars. The trend seems to have emerged out of the Furry community, and appears to have begun in earnest, though it has sometimes been picked up as a meme by people who find the idea amusing.

A Butterfly Flapping Its Wings

Fun fact: there exists (and Shinichi uses) a native Japanese equivalent of this proverb: “When the wind blows, the coopers profit.” According to the Japanese website kotobank, which explains various proverbs (*kotowaza*), the logic goes like this: “When the wind blows, there's more dust. The dust gets in people's

eyes and causes them to go blind. Blind people commonly make their living by playing the samisen [a three-stringed, lute-like instrument]. This causes a rise in the demand for cats, as samisen are often strung with catgut. But fewer cats mean more rats, which chew through barrels, hence barrel makers see an increase in business.”

The World on a Turtle

Several world cultures have stories suggesting the world is supported on the back of a turtle or tortoise, or sometimes on the back of something else (such as several elephants) that are themselves standing on a turtle.

Visions of the End

Hikaru lists off quite a few different versions of the end-times idea, which seems to have appeared in some form or another in virtually all human cultures. The Book of Revelation, the last book of the Christian Bible, contains a variety of elaborate prophecies that at least nominally depict the end of the world. (It’s sometimes argued that the author was making coded references to Rome, to advance ideas he couldn’t spell out explicitly without danger to his life, but such debates are well beyond the scope of this note.) This includes a “last judgment” at which humanity is divided into those who inherit paradise and those who are thrown into a lake of fire. *Mappou*, literally “the decline of the Dharma,” is the way Buddhism conceptualizes the end times: as a span of time in which people will be less and less drawn to and influenced by the Dharma (that is, the teachings of the Buddha). This has been a concern in Japanese Buddhism for at least a thousand years. Finally, “the twilight of the gods” is the event perhaps more widely known as Ragnarök, the Norse story holding that at the end of the world a great battle will take place that will involve the death of several gods. The actual expression “twilight of the gods” is probably better associated with the last installment of Richard Wagner’s *Ring* cycle, *Götterdämmerung*.

It’s interesting to note that although we often think of such tales in terms of “the end of the world,” as Hikaru does here, almost all of these stories come

with a hopeful coda. In the Book of Revelation, the saved live in the new Jerusalem, a shining city of gemstones and gold. And *mappou* isn't a strictly apocalyptic vision. It's believed that after 10,000 years of this degeneration, the Maitreya Buddha will appear and instigate a new era of fidelity to Buddhist teaching. Finally, even the Norse seem to have believed that after the great battle of Ragnarök, the world would be submerged in water but would emerge renewed and fertile.

Reaction Weapon

A weapon from the *Macross* franchise.

Wave Motion Gun

Hadou-hou in Japanese. Although this has become something of a generic term in anime for massive, planet-destroying weapons, the original wave motion gun belonged to the Space Battleship *Yamato*.

Super Laser

In Japanese, *wakusei hakai biimu*, or “planet-destroying beam.” This is a more general term than *hadou-hou*, and is most prominently associated with the Death Star's super weapon (from *Star Wars*). That weapon is usually called its “superlaser” in English, so that's what we went with for the translation.

****cke** *The Superman*

Locke the Superman (*Choujin Rokku*) began life as a manga in the late '60s, and the series is still ongoing today, having gone through various incarnations and publishers. Several OVAs and a movie were also released.

Co**ny Drop

The “colony drop” is a tactic from *Mobile Suit Gundam*, specifically a moment in the original series when the Principality of Zeon attempts to ram one of their space colonies into a Federation military base on Earth. The expression has

come to have a wider range, and can facetiously refer to anything large that gets dropped from space onto a planet or moon.

The Red Faldra

When Loek insists that the lead Faldra be “red and have a horn,” presumably he’s thinking of Char’s mobile suit from *Gundam*. Char’s suit is said to be “three times as fast” as a normal Zaku unit, hence Loek’s next comment.

The Vampire Squad

The “Red Shoulders” are a military unit from the ’80s mech drama *Armored Trooper VOTOMS*, a unit which was also given the nickname “the Vampire Squad.”

Just Like Joj*!

Shinichi is making a reference to a specific pose struck by the characters of *Jojo’s Bizarre Adventure*.

Ha*kyu**

The *hadoukyuu* (lit. “ball of destruction”) is a fictional move from *Prince of Tennis*.

Anime Moves

Shinichi and Minori unleash a blizzard of techniques inspired by anime and manga. The list includes (deep breath) the Hokuto Hyakuretsuken (Hundred Rending Fists), the iconic attack of the main character of *Fist of the North Star*; the Futae no Kiwami, a devastating strike learned by Sanosuke in *Rurouni Kenshin*; the Kimen Flash from the *Kimengumi* franchise; Tiro Finale, a finishing move from the *Madoka Magica* series; the Dismembering Halo (*Yattsu-zaki Kourin*) from *Ultraman*; the Galactica Magnum, which is either a super-punch from the series *Ringu ni Kakero! (Leave It All in the Ring!)*, or, less plausibly, a move used by Sailor Galaxia in the *Sailor Moon* musicals; the Bodhisattva Fist

(*Bosatsu Ken*) from *Baki the Grappler*; the Hardening Punch (*Koushitsu-ka Panchi*), probably referring to an ability of some characters in *Attack on Titan*; the Bakurei Jigoku, probably from *Bastard!!*; the Eternal Force Blizzard, a Japanese internet meme; and finally the Diamond Eternal, a combo attack from *Pretty Cure*. (Phew!)

Vertical Maneuvering Equipment

A device from *Attack on Titan* that allows characters to fly briefly through the air.

Zangief's Super Uryah Jou

The *Street Fighter* character Zangief has a move called the Super Lariat (*Suupaa Rariato*, called the "Double Lariat" in English). However, when reporting on *Super SF II Turbo*, a writer for a Japanese game magazine allegedly wrote the name of the move so messily that his scribbles were misinterpreted, and the finished article gave the name of the move as the nonsensical "Super Uriajjou." This has become a long-standing joke/meme among Japanese video game fans, but obviously doesn't translate very well into English.

"Bro, Get Outta the Way, I Can't Kill Her!"

An urban legend from the Japanese internet, the so-called "S-Ken Tsukimiya Incident," tells of a messy online love triangle in which one woman stalked and attempted to kill another because of her relationship with a man they both knew in an MMO. The quote is what the first woman allegedly said when the man threw himself in front of the stalking victim to protect her.

Catharsis **ve

Catharsis Wave is a move from the 1984 tokusatsu series *Seiun Kamen Mashinman* (*Nebula Mask Machineman*).

Fina* Tiiime!

The Japanese “*fainaru da yooon*” is a callout to the name/verbal tic of a character from Akatsuka Fujio’s ’60s comedy manga *Osomatsu-kun*.

“Your Barrage Is Weak! What Are You Doing?!”

A complaint widely associated with Bright Noa from *Mobile Suit Gundam*.

Dy*** Warriors... Isekai War*******

Shinichi first refers to a “*musou* game,” then suggests that the title should be *Isekai Musou*. The word *musou* literally means “unparalleled” or “peerless,” but the word is prominently featured in the titles of Koei’s series of mash-and-smash historical brawler video games. For example, the branch of the series set in ancient China is called *Sangoku Musou* (“Peerless [Ones of] the Three Kingdoms”), and the entire franchise is referred to as the “*Musou* series” in Japan. The games have been localized using the word “Warriors,” as in *Dynasty Warriors*, hence our choice of *Isekai Warriors* to translate Shinichi’s proposed title.

Chapter Three: Fire? Fire!!

An Astronaut

The quote as Hikaru gives it (“*Uchuu wo shitta ningen wa kesshite mae to onaji dewa irarenai*”) is widely attributed on the Japanese internet to Russell “Rusty” Schweickart, a NASA astronaut who was involved in a number of missions including the Apollo 9 mission in 1969. However, no quotation of his that we could find in English quite matched the meaning of the Japanese.

Fahrenheit 451

As Shinichi mentions in the text, Ray Bradbury’s 1953 novel depicted a dystopian future society in which books are incinerated for containing dangerous ideas. The protagonist is one of the “firemen” who deals with such contraband material (“It was a pleasure to burn,” opines the opening narration), but he begins to question his vocation when he sees a sample of what he’s destroying. The 1966 film version was directed by no less a personage than François Truffaut. The 2002 movie *Equilibrium* (which Shinichi refers to by its Japanese title, *Rebellion*) borrowed parts of its premise and some of its themes from Bradbury’s novel. As for the light novel Shinichi mentions, it’s likely he’s thinking of *Fahrenheit 9999*, a two-volume LN series about a future Japan in which otaku culture is heavily restricted. It's worth noting, though, that the series *Library Wars* also has some (admittedly broader) similarities to the Bradbury story.

“When Youuu Reaaach For Your Dreaaaam...”

This is a reference to the opening theme of the anime version of *Kyojin no Hoshi* (*Star of the Giants*), a sports manga/anime from the 1960s. The connection might only be the presence of the word “giant” in the title.

A*-*Ts in *Star W**s*

That is, the AT-AT (All-Terrain Armored Transport) “Walkers” that appeared in

the 1980 movie *Star Wars Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back*.

The Terminitor**

The Terminator, the unstoppable robotic killer from the film franchise of the same name.

E*doskeletons

“Endoskeleton” is the term for the artificial skeletal structure that makes up the body of a Terminator android.

Live-In Disciple

In the afterword, Sakaki-sensei jokingly refers to his assistant as “also (an) *uchi-deshi*.” An *uchi-deshi* (lit. “inside student”) is a student or disciple who lives in their teacher’s home, helping with menial tasks while also having the opportunity to observe the master up close and to learn constantly. This was a common arrangement in many disciplines, especially the martial arts, until as late as the end of World War II.







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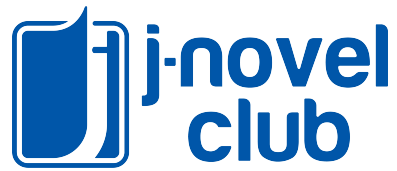
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Outbreak Company: Volume 16

by Ichiro Sakaki

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